

A scenic landscape photograph of an Oregon valley. The foreground is dominated by a large, dark, gnarled tree on the right and a rocky outcrop on the left. The middle ground shows a lush green valley with rolling hills and a small yellow flower. The background features blue mountains under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The text is overlaid on the center of the image.

Somewhere in
an Oregon Valley

Jon Remmerde

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[Whitney Valley](#)

February 27. I kept two kerosene lamps turned up high on my work table and wrote into the early hours of the morning. About three a.m., I took my guitar from its case and played and sang several songs, softly, because my wife, Laura, slept in our bed six feet from me, and our daughters, Juniper and Amanda, nine and seven then, five years into our time in Whitney Valley, slept in the next room, twenty feet from me.

I built a song about spring coming to our mountain valley, and I wrote down the words and chords. I fed wood to the fire in the back room heater, walked through Juniper and Amanda's room, and fed the front room heater. I walked out onto the front porch and shone my flashlight on the thermometer. Ten degrees below zero.

A waning moon hung high in the clear sky. Snow two feet deep covered the wild mountain meadow around our old, ramshackle house. The meadow sloped a hundred and fifty yards from our house down to the north fork of the Burnt River. Across the river from the house, the meadow rose to the base of the ridge, about a quarter of a mile from the river, where the forest west of us began. Soft moonlight reflected

bright from the snow. Densely growing willow bush along the river shadowed the iced-over stream black in moonlight.

A killdeer's insistent call carried across the snow-covered meadow and startled me. The bird had come north too soon. Surely it would freeze.

My breath condensed to ice in my beard and mustache. Cold drove toward my bones. I walked back into the house and checked my daughters. They stretched out straight in their beds. Had they been too cold, they would have curled up tightly, and I would have added more blankets.

The next night, the first Canada geese returned from south and flew above the meadow, calling loudly. Two days later, four killdeers circled above the snow, calling. These small, long-legged, grey, black, and white, gentle birds of the phalarope family, are misnamed. Their distinctive, high-pitched, two-syllable call doesn't say, "Kill deer. Kill deer. It says, "Shakespeare. Shakespeare," though at times, I'm just as sure it says, "John Donne. John Donne."

Migrating birds arriving in Whitney Valley when nights were still quite cold seemed to do well. A hundred yards below the house, a seep spread water over a wide, marshy area on its way to the river. The warmth of the water from that seep melted the snow. Grass sent up green shoots. Willows opened bright green leaves. More than a dozen marshy seeps and springs surround the meadow. Birds make their living in the melted-off areas below the springs and seeps until the meadow clears of snow.

More birds flew back from their winter homes as spring greened and softened Whitney Valley. A robin perched in willows in warm sunshine early one March morning. Two geese stood face to face on snow by the marsh below the house and honked at each other as if each thought the other

hard of hearing.

Juniper, square shouldered, with short brown hair, our tomboy, and Amanda, feminine even then, thin and tall, with long, golden red hair, explored the sun-bright day.

Their personalities and interests often contrasted sharply. Amanda liked dolls and dresses, but Juniper wouldn't have anything to do with either. Juniper sought adventure, and Amanda tried to keep up, though she sometimes wished for a more conservative existence centered more in our home, concentrating more on quiet observation and a little less on active participation.

But Juniper and Amanda shared their lives with each other on the remote ranch in northeastern Oregon's Blue Mountains. Through the eight and a half years we took care of the ranch, they knew few other children. The children they did know, they seldom saw, so they worked through their contrasts in personalities and interests and stayed best friends and constant companions. They shared their education at home, their interest in acting out some of their wide reading, their interest in drawing, painting, and writing, and their interest in the natural world around them in Whitney Valley.

I watched them walk across snow to the edge of the marsh. I called them, and they stopped and waited for me as I crossed the garden on the crust on two feet of snow and stepped over the fence. "Did you get water in your boots?"

Juniper said, "No. On our boots, but not in our boots."

"Part of that marsh is deep, soft mud. You could sink way over your boots. You should stay out of there."

Amanda asked, "Is it quicksand?"

"Very like quicksand, for quite a ways down. I sank over my short waders once, to here. It was messy and cold, with my boots full of water and mud. I had a hard time getting out

of there.”

Amanda said, “If you get in quicksand, you should lie down and wiggle to the edge.”

I broke through the crust on snow and sank to mid thigh. I lay down on the snow and rolled to the side to get my leg out. “You mean wiggle out of quicksand like this?”

Amanda looked into the hole in the snow I left when I pulled my leg out. “Look, there’s grass down there.” We all looked into the hole. An open space between the snow and the ground harbored grass as green as spring.

I said, “That’s the vole’s winter world. They stay active under the insulation of the snow.” Wind rose and carried some of the warmth from sunshine away. “I’m not dressed for cold wind. I’m going to go back to the house and write. Are you two going to be warm enough?”

Amanda said, “Except my hands.”

“You can use my gloves. They’re too big, but they’ll keep your hands warm. Will they work?” I handed her my gloves. She put them on and held her hands out in front of her. Her hands looked huge. We laughed.

“They’ll work. As long as I don’t try to pick anything up, they’ll work.”

“How about you, Juniper? Are you warm enough?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll depend on you to get more clothes or come in if you get too cold.”

“Okay.”

I walked around the edge of the marsh, back into the house, sat down, and wrote at the table in the back room. I wrote about the threads of meaning that knit together our daily existence. I wrote about wild animals we saw in Whitney Valley. I wrote about our existence without

plumbing or electricity, about Juniper and Amanda learning at home rather than in public school, about our existence almost outside the consumer culture. We lived close to poverty in material terms, but we harvested rich rewards daily. Our family stayed closely knit in a culture where strong, positive values centered around families seemed to have some difficulty surviving.

Because of our circumstances and our beliefs, Laura and I accepted the responsibility for educating Amanda and Juniper ourselves. Our approach to education worked well for learning about all of existence. Our approach taught all of us how to learn effectively and reinforced the closeness of our family.

I looked up from my writing, out the big south window next to my writing table. Amanda and Juniper watched birds in and around the willows. Killdeers kept up a constant serenade of the sunny morning and ran through the marshy area and over the snow, not far from my daughters. Juniper and Amanda ventured through densely growing willows whose tight spring buds started opening into green leaves. I couldn't see anything of them but glimpses of color, Amanda's hair or Juniper's pink cape blowing in the wind.

Early in the afternoon, the wind died. I picked up my camera and tracked my daughters. They had crossed the road to the sagebrush field behind Willy's hunting cabin. They sat on a wooden structure that stuck up above the snow in sunshine. I said, "I thought this would be a good time to get some pictures."

Juniper said, "Take pictures of us on the transporting machine."

"Where does it transport you to?"

"If we can poem it right, it will take us to Middle Earth,

Hobbit land.”

Click. “Will it bring you back?”

“Don’t know yet. First we have to see if we can get there.”

Click. Click. “Right. If you get there and have trouble getting back, someone there can help you with it.”

“Probably.”

“Would you want to come back?”

“Sure. Eventually.”

Click. Uneasiness catches me for a moment. How powerful is imagination? Should I caution them not to get too serious about seeking Middle Earth? Respect for freedom, for the power of creativity wins out over my possessiveness, and I decide to let them journey to Middle Earth if they can.

“Okay. I have some pictures. Be careful.”

Amanda said, “We always are.”

March progresses across the mountains. The days warm up. Snow melts. New, green grass grows on the meadow.

Early afternoon of a warm spring day, I spade composted horse manure into garden soil behind the house. Laura brought wet laundry from the laundromat in Sumpter, and she hangs it on the clothesline below the garden. I lean on the handle of my spading fork and watch her.

She picks clothing from the basket on the ground, shakes it out, and pins it to the line. She works outlined against the meadow. The forested ridge rises behind her, across the meadow, across the river. She looks like part of this ranch and our way of life in this mountain valley. She’s usually at peace with our existence, though sometimes, she’s still troubled by questions about why we live the way we live. A long time ago, I decided Laura will have questions about any way of existence she is involved in. She will have moments of uncertainty about life, and I’m better able to accept those

times of apparent upset as just the way she works her way through existence.

My perspective shifts a little. Laura could be a deer, lithe, graceful. Not long after we met, she came from the Sacramento valley up to the mountain where I lived then. We walked to a mountain meadow and picked apples from an abandoned orchard. Laura wore a grey shirt, faded jeans, and my battered, grey-felt cowboy hat. She reached up into a tree to pick a ripe winesap apple above her. I was shocked by how much she looked like a deer standing on its hind legs, reaching up into the tree for an apple.

Hunting season had opened on the mountain. I hurried to her, pulled my bright yellow raincoat from the small backpack I'd brought, and handed it to her, "Put this on."

"It isn't raining."

I said, "No, but it's going to in about a minute."

She smiled at me as if I amused her, and she put the rain jacket on. Within a minute, rain poured from the clouds close above us.

When we lived in the Sacramento Valley, I drove tractor for a farmer. Laura was pregnant with Juniper. She drove out to where I disced the dusty field. She started across the broken ground, carefully placed one foot, and shifted her weight forward to take her next step. I saw her, lifted the implement, and turned the tractor toward her. Grey skirt, grey top. She reminded me of a pregnant doe stepping carefully across broken ground.

My memories evaporate in bright sunshine for now, and I return to Whitney Valley. Laura shakes out a towel and hangs it on the line. Sunshine shows red highlights in her shining, brown hair. Red patterns in her shirt stand out against the green and brown ridge far behind her. In my vision, her

image blends with images of Whitney Valley.

Springtime sunshine does strange things to the way I see the world. I like the way my perspective shifts and includes new images, new ways of seeing.

I push my spading fork down into the ground, and break more soil loose.

Juniper and Amanda swing in the swings I built for them of dead lodgepole pine trees, ropes, and boards our second year here. They sing, make up poems, and laugh.

For the first time this spring, we hear the two sandhill cranes who live in Whitney Valley. They call from Camp Creek Valley, impossible-to-describe trumpeting, so loud, we hear them from more than a mile away. We stop and listen. We see them flying toward us, close above the willows along Camp Creek. Majestic, grey, red-crowned birds, they power their huge wings down in slow, curving strokes against the clear mountain air, stretch their long necks straight forward, and trail their long legs behind. They cross the highway and fly above the barn and then over us, not more than twenty feet above us, calling all the way. They fly across the river, across the meadow, land by the edge of the timber, and fall silent as they begin to eat.

It takes us a while to remember what we were doing before we heard the cranes. Laura says, "They came to say hello, to let us know they're back."

Yes. It does seem like that. We feel knit into the rhythms of the seasons and part of the life in this valley.

Birds who thrive in semi-arid land inhabit the sagebrush areas in Whitney valley and east and north of the valley. Birds who like dense forest live on the ridges rising west and south. Birds live close to the streams and on the streams running through Whitney Valley. Marsh birds inhabit

irrigated and marshy areas. Eagles and hawks include the wild meadows in their wide range. Very shy, rarely seen small rails hide in the lushly growing grasses.

Brilliant sun arcs across the mountain blue sky and shines our spring day full of warmth.

Laura walks down the graveled county road toward the south end of Whitney Valley for a time away from responsibilities as mother, wife, main teacher, cook. She finds an interlude of solitude. She finds early wildflowers.

Juniper, Amanda, and I stroll and chat together closer to the house. We watch two geese on the seep below the house speak to each other in stentorian tones of spring, love, and the continuation of all life. These are *branta canadensis moffitti*, the largest Canada geese. They take to wing and fly up the meadow and back. One banks and lands on the peak of the barn roof. The other circles once and attempts to land. Something goes wrong, and it doesn't stop on the peak. It slides down the metal roof, wings spread, feet backpedaling. The scrape, scrape sound of its feet on metal picks up tempo, faster and faster as it accelerates down the long roof, trying to stop and talking to the roof-stander about what is happening.

The sliding goose honks and takes to the air just as it plummets over the eave and the snow piled under it. The big, black, white, and grey goose flies above snow on the meadow, gains altitude, circles back and lands on the peak of the barn roof.

Geese honk their way down Camp Creek Valley, turn west, and fly up Whitney Valley, above the north fork of the Burnt river, and part way up Greenhorn mountain. They turn and fly back, dark forms against the sky.

Juniper asks, "Why is the sky so brown?"
"Smog."

“How would we have smog here?”

“Well, the highway’s right here. County roads. Logging roads. Chain saws. All the machinery when we hay. And the smog from industrial areas doesn’t just stay there. It spreads around the world.”

Amanda says, “It isn’t good for the geese to fly through that, is it?”

Juniper says, “Where else can they fly?”

“Why don’t they just stop it? It isn’t necessary.”

Their suggested solution for environmental problems is simple: “If it causes damage, don’t do it. Find another way to get what you need.”

I talk about the complexities of our economic, political, religious, and cultural structures. I tell them implementing their solution to the problems caused by pollution would require a difficult, basic change in society’s approach to the Earth.

After the explanation of the way the world works, my daughters return me to our starting point. Amanda says, “I know all that, or a lot of it, anyway. All I know is, if it can be stopped, then it should be stopped.”

I agree with my daughters that all mankind’s needs could be met in peaceful community with all life. The techniques needed to make the changes, the tools, the knowledge, all are part of the culture and available for use.

Juniper says, “What will happen to the world by the time we grow up? Will there be anything left for us?”

She asks to express her wonder. She knows I can’t answer her questions. We live as clean an existence as we can. We try to help, even if we only pick up trash by the road or support an organization that helps animals. We limit our use of machinery and energy, and we exercise our economic and

political power to try to bring about change.

We are caretakers of this twelve-hundred acre ranch we live on. I irrigate the meadows, and we harvest wild meadow hay late in summer. The major thrust of what we do for a living is not destructive to the earth nor to the habitat of the wild animals around us. We expect everyone to understand we can be benevolent, intelligent caretakers of the Earth. We expect humankind to overcome the desire for material accumulation beyond need and inordinate power over others and to get on with the job. As Amanda says, with upturned palms and raised shoulders, “How many worlds are there? Just this one, right?”

I look again at the wild birds and at my daughters. There may be no guarantee that everything will always be in balance, but they go on with their daily living. They don't hesitate to invest their entire energy in the good that is the life force.

I think they provide a good example for me, and I get on with living.

On Coalpit Mountain

Nine years before we moved to Whitney Valley, several years before I met Laura, I rode a motorcycle down the Sierra mountains, toward the Sacramento Valley. A man in a Rambler Rebel turned directly in front of me. I slammed five hundred and fifty pounds of motorcycle into his car, crushed my lower left leg between the machines, flew over his car, shattered my helmet on the asphalt, fractured my skull, and ripped muscles, tendons, and intestines.

I gained and lost consciousness several times on the asphalt parking lot and then on the way down the mountain in an ambulance. Red lights flashed against rock bluffs. Wailing siren echoed from canyon walls. Furious anger consumed me, at sudden, massive injury, at a man so stupid he drank alcohol and drove his car, fury at the smashing of my hopes and plans. I used up anger, burned it out of me. Fear replaced anger, fear of death, fear of a future unpredictably altered by injury. I used up fear, surrendered to whatever would come to me, and passed deeply into unconsciousness again.

I came into consciousness in a hospital in Redding, filled with an intense sense of peace, overflowing with good humor and joy. In simplest terms, life and consciousness of the goodness of life filled me. I loved being alive. I loved life. Every moment, I experienced deep gratitude for life, gratitude for my life, gratitude for all life, for the force that animates every form of life. Filled with life and gratitude for life, I knew I would work my way through all difficulties brought by injury into a future filled with joy.

Love of life and gratitude for life ebbed in difficult times, but I always clung to enough to knit together my existence, as

rhythm knits together a complex piece of music.

In thirty days, I left the hospital. In six months, a doctor cut the last in a series of casts from my leg. He told me not to put weight on my left leg for six more months. Supported by crutches, I practiced correct motion from my hip, through the motion of my knee, through my ankle, and placed my foot straight on the ground. I put so many miles on those crutches, I had to wear well-fitted leather gloves to keep my hands from blistering.

When I started to put weight on my leg again, I couldn't stay in a city. I couldn't walk on the unyielding surfaces of asphalt and concrete without rapidly suffering more pain than I could bear.

The man who hit me had no money, no job, no property, and no insurance. I had a fifteen- thousand dollar uninsured motorist policy on the motorcycle. Medical bills ate a lot of that, but I took what was left and looked for a place to learn to walk again.

In northeastern Oregon, at five-thousand feet elevation on the north slope of Coalpit Mountain, a south-facing saddle rises high enough to present itself even to winter sun. I counted on the money I had and the agreement of several friends to buy in on the place with me, and I made a commitment to buy forty acres as soon as the estate released title to the land.

I moved to the mountain. Among house-sized granite boulders, above sheer bluffs that truncated the saddle, I planned to build a house, a greenhouse, and a garden. On the mountain, I planned to learn to walk again. Ponderosa pine, aspen, and thickets of mountain mahogany, small, twisted trees with multiple trunks and hard grey-green leaves, surrounded me. East, the black stone of the Strawberry

Mountains rose from the valley. North, dry hills stood above the John Day Valley.

I tied a rope between two trees, stretched a tarp over the rope, drove stakes into rust-colored decomposed granite, and tied down the ends of the tarp. My supplies that shouldn't get wet, I moved under the tarp. I left space in the center so I could move my sleeping bag in when summer storms hit the mountain, with room for a cat on one side of me and a dog on the other.

I crossed the fence into Forest Service rangeland, gathered dry cow chips into burlap sacks, tied the sacks onto my pack frame, and packed them up to the place I'd selected for a garden. I dug the manure into the soil. I dug out the cow-stomped spring for a clean run of water and fenced the cattle out. I filled two six-gallon plastic jugs with cold, clear water from the spring each morning. Traveling on crutches, I packed one jug at a time on my pack frame up to the garden. Sunshine heated the water. Mid afternoon, I soaked up sunshine and then bathed and watered the garden with the runoff.

Radishes, lettuce, kohlrabi, onions, and carrots sprouted in the garden soil.

Every morning, I walked up the mountain a quarter of a mile, a half-mile, using my cane, as far as I could walk without more pain than I could bear.

When I had been on the mountain three weeks, confident in my growing strength, I left my cane in camp and hiked up the swale that spread green grass, willow bushes, aspen trees, and small springs down the steep slope. Mountain mahogany grew in drier ground above the swale and shared the ground with pine trees, fir trees, and juniper trees. Far up the mountain, in bright, warm sunshine, among granite boulders

several times as tall as I was, my leg started hurting. I turned back toward camp. The last part of the journey, I couldn't put any weight on my left leg without more pain than I could take. I crawled back to camp, laughing at what a ridiculous figure I had become, crying in pain and frustration.

I crawled into my sleeping bag as night enfolded the mountain. Coyotes sang down the mountain from me. Halfway through the night, I woke, screaming in pain. Brilliant stars shone above me. I wanted to find a doctor to prescribe pain pills. I wanted to give up the whole stupid idea of healing and learning to walk well. I thought I should accept limitations that were just too hard to overcome.

But I made it through the night, and I stayed on the mountain. I had to use crutches again, but I walked. I put all the weight I could bear on my leg.

Three days later, I left the crutches leaning against a pine tree. Two days after that, I walked without the cane again. I knew when I needed to turn back a little better.

Some days, I thought intense loneliness would overwhelm me. I thought I lived, the only human, on a huge, impersonal earth. Finding a sense of peace and fulfillment in those times of deep loneliness was as arduous as anything physical I did.

I sat on the bluff above camp at dusk. Night hawks flew above the north slope of Coalpit Mountain, dove, and made hollow, booming sounds when they swooped up from their dives.

In the bright sunlight of the next day, I walked below the bluff and found a night hawk nest with eggs, just a scraped-out spot in the gravel from decomposing granite. The speckled eggs blended so well with the ground, I couldn't find them again after the first time. I kept the dog and the cat away from that area, and I gave it a wide berth. I wanted the

nesting area undisturbed until the fledglings took to wing and harvested insects from the air with a high-pitched call and the booming sound of wings against the air.

Late in July, I wanted my mail, and I needed groceries, but the car I had borrowed for the summer refused to start. I walked down Coalpit Mountain toward the town of Mount Vernon. A half-mile below camp, I slid down the cutbank onto the gravel road and looked back up the hill. My black dog, who had been staying close to me, faced dense brush and pranced and bowed, as if he invited another dog to play. I climbed back up to see what he faced.

A mature coyote with her rear foot caught in a steel trap lay on the ground and looked at me and my dog. A chain attached the trap to a limb, which she had dragged until it tangled in brush, and she could go no farther. She lay on her side, with her head up, her deep yellow eyes alert. She seemed calm, without fear of me or the dog.

I walked past the dog, studied the coyote, and thought about it. I was aware of the trapper's perspective, but I could do nothing else. I stepped closer and stepped down on one spring, but the trap didn't open far enough. I crouched over the trap and stepped down on both springs, with my face less than a foot from the coyote's face. I lifted her leg clear. The steel trap had severed half her foot, but it had pinched blood vessels closed, and she wasn't bleeding. I put her leg down, pitched the trap into the brush, and stood up. The warm, bright day held silence all across the mountain. The coyote and I looked at each other. I said, "You'd better go."

She leaped up, spun in the air, and loped away from me up the ridge, carrying her injured foot clear of the ground. I thought a three-and-a-half-footed coyote might make a living. Some do.

Dog and I slid down the cutbank onto the hard gravel road and hiked toward town in intense mountain sunshine. Black dog separated from me far enough to walk in the shade from willow bushes and aspen trees along the creek. I liked the heat of sunshine and the smoother surface of the road. I left my cane fastened to my pack all the way to town. We started back up the mountain, with the pack full of groceries, and I needed the cane. Even with the cane, by the time we got to Engles Creek, my leg hurt.

I lay down by the stream and rested a while. Then I stripped and slid into the water. Kicking my legs gently in the water relaxed muscles and eased the pain.

The sun dropped toward the western mountains. I dried in sunshine, dressed, and shouldered my pack. I thought of the injured coyote loping away from me on three legs, and that's how I traveled the rest of the way back to camp, like a four-legged, carrying one leg off the ground. Up the steep slope from Engles Creek to camp, I didn't have to bend far to use my hands like feet. I traveled fast and easily, and the black dog stayed close all the way to camp.

By then, I knew pain could consume my knee and lower leg, but it didn't mean my leg would come apart. The pain would ease, with rest. I could scream if I needed to. There was no one within miles to hear me. And I did scream, because of pain. I formed my screaming into words, "I walked four and a half miles today without my cane. Four and a half miles. It was absolutely worth it. I can run on three legs like an injured coyote, and there's no stopping the healing power of the life force."

I laughed and rolled in the dirt. My dog came up close to see if I smelled different when I acted that strange way, and my cat came down from some hideout up in the rocks. I sat

up and looked at them. “Okay, you guys. End of the show for today. You’d be surprised how fast laughing eased the pain.”

A great horned owl soared down the mountain at dusk. Silent on its wings, it looked down at me where I sat leaning against a rock between two juniper trees, my dog curled up beside me. “Hey owl, how you doing? Stop and visit.” The owl flew a wide circle around camp, landed in the juniper tree at the top of the bluff, and settled its wings. It looked toward me, then down the slope falling away from camp.

The moon rose. The tree and the owl stood silhouetted against the huge moon hanging golden above dark stone mountains. The owl flew from the tree and hunted down the mountain, quiet as bright moonlight.

I didn’t build campfires anymore. I cooked on a gas-fired camp stove. Without a fire, I saw the night, the owl, bright stars, the moon. I saw a flying squirrel glide from tree to tree, silhouetted against the lighter sky. Stars and moon almost always provided light enough to walk at night, and I usually did.

Early in August, thunder storms rumbled on the mountain. I climbed the highest rock above the bluff. Sun just above the western mountains shone under the clouds and turned the mist hanging between mountain and clouds soft orange, then pink, then pastel blue. The sun set.

Lightning and thunder shook the mountain under my feet. Heavy rain blew down the mountain and soaked me on my high rock bluff. Lightning lit up everything around me with brilliant, blue light. Thunder nearly deafened me. I knew the danger of a high place during a lightning storm, but I stayed high above the granite bluff as the storm marched down the mountain. I didn’t defy natural forces nor dare death. I celebrated love of life, love of all the natural forces around

me.

Forces of the mechanized world, abetted by a driver under the influence of alcohol, had nearly killed me on the highway. I felt entitled to this celebration on the mountain in a way similar to the way people in primitive cultures sometimes faced potentially deadly natural forces and, through their understanding of and reverence for the Life Force that creates all forces, overcame the danger.

I danced, shouted, and sang with lightning, thunder, and rain, with the power of the storm. Lightning and thunder blew away north. I walked down to my camp and changed into dry clothing. I slept in my tent that night, out of the rain, cat on one side of me, close to my face, dog on the other side, curled against my legs.

Problems with the estate kept the title to the forty acres on Coalpit Mountain from clearing. It didn't matter. People who had planned to invest with me changed their minds. I didn't have enough money to buy the place on the mountain on my own. I had free use of Coalpit Mountain all summer, like the owl, like the deer and elk, like the coyotes, like lightning and thunder.

Cold fall wind blew across north slope. I hiked down to an abandoned apple orchard below the logging road and filled my pack, hiked back up, sliced apples, and spread them in sunshine to dry. I harvested the rest of my garden. I hiked every place I'd ever been and looked at it again. All summer, I never touched the camera I brought to the mountain. I couldn't have anything between me and what I saw. I couldn't have anything between me and what I did. This place on Coalpit Mountain won't exist in pictures I show anyone.

It exists in me, in images in my mind, in strong legs and a

strong body. I walk five miles without limping, without pain. I run. I scramble up slopes like a four-legged. Healing continues. Determination to build strength continues. Faith in the powerful positive force of life continues.

I couldn't find my cat. I circled the camp, called and looked. My black dog came to me and looked intently up the hill. He pointed one ear toward where he looked, then the other. I followed his point and found my cat up the swale, secluded behind upthrust roots of a blown-over pine, purring and treading the soft moss around the roots.

I dropped my jacket on the long-haired Siamese tom and wrapped him tightly, with just his nose out, carried him to the car and stuffed him in. When he worked his way free of the jacket, he crawled under the front seat and stayed there.

We rolled, a cloud of grey dust, down the gravel road, onto the highway.

Aspen leaves and the grasses of mountain meadows turn yellow in fall sunshine.

I drive onto the gravel shoulder beside the highway, stop the car, and get out. I look at Coalpit Mountain rising toward the blue mountain sky.

High above me on the mountain, the bluff where I often stood or sat and watched dusk settle into John Day Valley stands in the last of the day's bright sunshine. Standing below, looking up at the mountain, I trace the route I took when I hiked highest on the mountain.

When I was on the mountain, I thought one day I would hike clear to the top, stand in the mountain wind and sunshine, and look out over the whole world. During my summer on Coalpit Mountain, I never made it anyplace close to the top of the mountain. I don't feel disappointed. I experienced high peaks of existence all summer long.

I climb back into the car. The sun sets, and we drive onto the highway. Dusk falls into the mountain valleys and mountain forests. I put the windows up against the cool air of evening. The bright, twelve volt headlights light the curving asphalt highway and lead us steadily south.

Starting Over

I returned to Paradise, California, in the foothills of the Sierras above the northern Sacramento Valley, where I had lived before the summer on Coalpit Mountain and where friends lived. Verona offered me the use of a small cabin in her back yard. I accepted her offer and lived in the cabin for a while. I drove, walked, and hitchhiked all over the ridge Paradise sits on. I saw people, played my guitar, sang, and kept walking.

I found small jobs sometimes. Friends and relatives helped. I renewed hunting skills, and I ate illegal venison. When spring and summer came, I ate miner's lettuce, wild amaranth, dock, and a dozen other varieties of wild plants. I found every abandoned fruit tree within miles, and I carried fruit home with me.

For three years, I moved back and forth between California and northeastern Oregon. I wanted to stay in Oregon, but every time I lived there, my means ran out. Material support was no more sure in California, but warmer winters made it easier to survive than in the much colder winters of northeastern Oregon.

A strong thread of steady work to regain strength and stamina and an always present sense of joy knit my existence together.

I thought I would never own a new car. I might never own a house. I would probably never accumulate much material wealth. That didn't bother me. I changed my ideas about what constituted wealth and a rewarding existence. I survived on a very basic level. I felt close to the earth that fed me and bore me up. I practiced gratitude every day for life, for food,

for shelter, for everything beautiful around me, for every experience that enriched my life.

I met Laura, and we got to know each other and eventually married. She didn't care much about gaining material wealth either, or our courtship wouldn't have gone beyond being introduced to each other.

I gradually regained more ability to work. I drove machines for farmers. I made rammed-earth bricks on a piece-work basis. I mowed lawns, pulled weeds, built gardens, trimmed trees, built fences, did odd-job work where I could find it. I could work as hard as almost anyone else, but I couldn't work eight hours in a row, and I had to quit at unpredictable times to wrestle through physical problems.

In our small apartment in Willows, California, with friends there to help, in the early morning of September 25, I held Laura in my arms as she gave birth to Juniper, and we were three.

I said, "We should have two children. They can be friends for each other and play together. Two will be easier to take care of than one."

Two years later, to the day, I took Laura to the hospital in Willows. At 4:30 in the afternoon, in a quiet delivery room, with support from a doctor and nurses, but without interference, she gave birth to Amanda, and we became four.

The next summer, my mother drove to Willows to visit. She had trouble with her eyes, and she asked me to drive her home, to Sumpter, in northeastern Oregon. I stayed in Oregon for several days, and I didn't want to go back to California. I called Laura and said, "Let's move up here."

She said, "Let me think and pray about it. I'll call you tomorrow morning."

The next morning, she called and said, "Okay. Let's move

up there.”

I borrowed my mother’s small pickup, with a camper shell on it. We loaded everything we owned and the four of us into it and moved to Sumpter, in the Blue Mountains, where two of my sisters, my mother, and my brother lived.

I cut, piled, and burned thinned timber with my sister, Cheryl. When we finished that contract, I worked odd jobs around town.

Friends told me the caretaker planned to leave the Whitney ranch for another job. I drove out to Whitney Valley and talked with him. Then I drove down to the Rouse brothers’ home ranch, near Unity.

Cattle bawled. Dust rose above the corrals. People roped calves from horses, threw the calves to the ground, branded and castrated them. I climbed onto the corral rail. Smells of cow manure, dust, and hot branding irons hung in the air. A tall, heavy man in his sixties left his branding iron in the bucket that held the propane torch and walked over to me.

I said, “I’m looking for John or Mike Rouse.”

He said, “I’m Mike Rouse.”

“I’m Jon Remmerde. I talked to Tex up at Whitney. He’s packing up his trailer and leaving. He asked me to tell you he wanted to get down here and talk to you, but he has to get over to Prairie City to start his new job. He got slowed down by having to change the axle in his trailer.”

“I thought he might cut and run. Ain’t nothin for an old bachelor to do up there but work and maybe go fishing, and Tex don’t fish much.”

“Maybe a man with a family would stay longer. That’s why I came to talk to you. I can irrigate and fix fence and whatever else you need to have done up there. I’ve looked the place over. Tex told me about the ditches and fences. I have a

wife and two daughters, four and two years old. We could fix the house up. I could start a garden close to the house.”

“Sounds pretty good to me.”

“Good. We can get moved in, and I can start work right away.”

“Well, Johnny does the hiring. He’s in town right now, but he should be back just about any minute. We could walk over to the house. He’ll probably show up about the time we get there.”

We left the crew working in the corrals and walked across the graveled road and up the concrete walkway to the house. Huge old cottonwood trees grew around the house and reached limbs above the roof. New, bright green leaves grew in the warm spring day.

John drove in, left his pickup by the garage, and joined us. Mike introduced me and said, “Jon’s been up talking with Tex.”

John said, “How’s the old fart doing?”

I said, “He’s doing okay. By now, he’s on his way over to Prairie City to start a new job.”

Mike said, “Jon says he wants to take care of the irrigation and the fences and what not up there.”

John said, “Well, let’s go inside and talk about it.”

We went in and sat down in the living room with the big window overlooking Unity Reservoir. Geese, swans, and ducks floated on the reservoir and flew above the water. We drank coffee and talked about Tex, the ranch at Whitney, and some of the history of the area. John was three years older than Mike. They took over the home ranch from their father and their uncle when they were in their teens. Now they owned twenty-eight thousand acres in the area.

John asked me, “You ever do any irrigating?”

“I irrigated row crops over in the Treasure Valley one summer. Tex drew me a map in the dirt up there about how the main ditches run across the ranch. Row crop irrigation is different from flood irrigating meadows, but it shouldn’t be too hard to figure it out as I go. I’ve fixed enough fence to know how to do it.”

Mike said, “Main thing is, if a man has the ambition to do the work, none of it’s hard to figure out.”

“And I do have the ambition. I want the job, and I can figure out what I need to know. If I get stuck on needing to know anything I can’t figure out, I can come and see you.”

“Or phone,” Mike said. “We got a phone in the hunting cabin up there.”

I thought I probably had the job, but I needed to know for sure, so I asked John, “What do you think about me going to work?”

“Well, that sounds fine to me. We pay six hundred a month. You can get moved in and then start work. How long will it take you to move?”

“We can be moved in by Wednesday.”

“You might as well start work the fifteenth, then. We’ll come up as soon after the fifteenth as we can and show you anything you haven’t figured out by then.”

I drove back up six miles of paved road and sixteen miles of gravel road that I would, in the eight and a half years ahead, get to know well. I sang and whistled all the way home, pleased with the warm sunshine and pleased with my positive impression of John and Mike, an impression I never needed to change.

We moved from Sumpter, elevation forty-two hundred feet, thirteen miles over Huckleberry pass to Whitney, elevation forty-two hundred feet, April 14. We drove into the

front yard with a pickup load of our possessions. We left the pickup doors standing open in spring sunshine, and we walked through the old, ramshackle house. Juniper said, "This is a good house."

We all agreed. The house sat close to the county road, about three hundred yards from the highway, which, when we moved there, was still a graveled, rough road. The house had lasted from the old days, when Whitney was an active town and running the ranch took teams of horses and teams of men.

A hand-operated pitcher pump beside the sink drew water from a shallow well under the house. The water tasted of sulfur and rust. We brought drinking water with us from Sumpter, and we continued to bring drinking water from various places throughout our stay at Whitney.

My mother gave us a wood-fired cookstove, and we set that stove up in the kitchen. The living room had a wood-fired heater. We found another heater for the back room when we needed it.

The outhouse stood about a hundred feet behind the house, by the west fence.

Forty years before we moved in, people put the house on logs that would roll under it as it moved, hooked a tractor to it, pulled it from down by the sawmill to its present location, and built on the south half of the kitchen. Because the dirt the house sits on settled, the kitchen floor slants downward. Pots and pans on the stove and dishes in the cupboard rattle and jingle in rhythm to our movements around the kitchen. I thought of bracing the floor from underneath and making it more solid, but I never actually did the job.

We soon loved the small, dilapidated house and the music of dishes and cookware jingling and rattling, the music of

wind against ancient wood, the sound of metal roofing shifting with changes in temperature or in hard wind, the sound of birds nesting in the walls, and all the unexplained music the old house played for us through the seasons of our habitation.

Mike and John didn't come up and show me around until mid June. They didn't hire any more help than they needed, and they stayed busy on their home ranch. When they did come up, John asked me, "Did you get all the irrigation ditches figured out?"

I said, "Water flows downhill, doesn't it?"

"Sure does."

"That's all I needed to know. Once I figured that out, everything was easy."

John and Mike both laughed.

Figuring out what to do wasn't as easy as I made it sound. I figured out from Tex's descriptions where the boundaries probably lay and where the ditches ran within those boundaries, but I wasn't sure I was doing the work right, in the right places, until we cut the hay in the fall and I saw the results of my work.

That first spring, I turned water from the river, still running high and muddy from snow melting higher on the mountain, into ditches soon after we moved to the ranch. Geese, ducks, phalaropes, snipes, and other birds lived on the water flowing wide across the meadow and on the ground standing above that water.

I knew how to use fence tools. I learned effective ways to work as I worked. I started getting the fences into better shape, and I irrigated up a good crop of hay.

Mike and John never asked me how many hours or days I worked. They never said a word about it if they came up to

Whitney Valley in the middle of the day and I wasn't working. I didn't tell them I had physical problems. I might be off my feet one day, or I might have to stop clearing a ditch of weeds and rest before I finished the job, but I caught up on the work another day.

Ranch work doesn't pay much, but it took considerably less than forty hours a week to do everything necessary. I had time to be with my family, time to write, and time to play my guitar and sing.

Whitney Valley supports irrigated wild meadow, with sagebrush desert where the irrigation water doesn't reach. Ponderosa pine trees, lodgepole pine, Douglas fir, and western larch trees grow on the ridges surrounding the valley. In drier south and west slope, widely spaced pine and juniper trees share the ridges with sagebrush and open meadow. Much of eastern Oregon is dry, sagebrushy land, but you are rarely more than half a mile from water in northeastern Oregon, with small streams and springs scattered across the land.

Loggers cut the big, virgin timber by the nineteen thirties. Modern loggers cut second and third growth timber now, in many places.

Hale Valley falls south into Whitney Valley in wide meadows, interrupted by forest of ponderosa pine and by dense willow bushes along Camp Creek. North of Hale Valley, mountains rise sharply. South, the north fork of the Burnt River runs out of Whitney valley. High bluffs crowd the river into a narrow canyon and rise to steep ridges above the valley. Willow, aspen, and alders grow around springs and along streams. Along the edge of many of the mountain meadows, aspen grow densely and small springs discharge water toward the nearest streams.

Welcome, Spring

Our fifth year in Whitney valley, in March, Laura hangs laundry to dry, and I spade the garden. Amanda and Juniper swing, laugh, make up new poems, and sing in morning sunshine. Two sandhill cranes fly over the house calling loudly, and we welcome them back. We welcome green grasses, green leaves, the first wildflowers, and multitudinous migratory birds. Spring smells damp and green. Breezes from nearby forests carry smells of spring sap rising in trees and smells of wild animals.

Snow still covers the higher mountains around us and north slope at lower elevations, but most of the snow in Whitney Valley melted and ran into the north fork of the Burnt River, oceanward.

Six cinnamon teal ducks paddle about a pool in the marshy ground below us. Four mallards quack and fly down the valley, close above the river.

I walk around to the front porch and pick up a shovel. “I’m going to see if any ditches along this side need work. Do you two want to go with me?”

Juniper says, “We could take our toboggans and slide on the hill before the rest of the snow melts.” Amanda and Juniper get their toboggans, and we walk up the meadow, zigging and sagging to stay on high ground, above the wetter grasses of low ground to keep our feet dry.

It isn’t necessary to start irrigation work yet; nature does a good job of soaking the ground, but I want to see how the water spreads. I want to see if the ditches came through winter in good shape. I want to walk on the meadow and see what’s new. I want to be a part of the life, the movement, and

the new growth of spring.

Geese watch us walk up the meadow. They prepare to fly if we come too close. They go back to their feeding and communicating when they see we're going on by. Juniper and Amanda head up the hill. I forbear saying, "Be careful of the ditch." I saw it as a possible danger, full speed into the ditch bank, and talked to them about it long ago. They took what I said into account. They've been sliding down that hill all winter.

The ditch onto the lower meadow this side of the river runs full. Snow-melt from north slope flows through culverts under the highway into the ditch. I follow the ditch along the face of the hill and clear out pine needles and small branches. An uprooted lodgepole pine spans the ditch. Broken branches sticking down into the water have stopped pine needles, leaves, and floating manure and formed the beginning of an effective dam.

I throw debris up on the bank and break branches by hitting them with the shovel. I'll have to bring my chainsaw and limb the tree and cut it up, but water flows unobstructed now, so I start back.

Amanda and Juniper finished tobogganing, and they carry their toboggans toward the barn. I shovel manure and pine needles from the ditch that irrigates hay ground below the barn. Then I walk up slope from the meadow and climb the fence into the garden.

Volunteer garlic sprouts green. I dig multiple spears from the soft, wet soil, separate the cloves, and plant them with space enough between them to grow.

Every day for more than a week, I repair fence around the small field just south of the house.

As soon as green grass grows tall enough for bovines to

eat, the crew from the Rouse brothers' home ranch will stuff the hospital bunch into horse trailers and haul them up to this field. These are steers that have been sick and have been separated from the rest of the steers and doctored through the winter. The workers on the home ranch want to get these yearlings out of the way, so their idea of when cattle can begin to live from growing grass in the pasture is often earlier than mine. I've been caught short of an adequately-repaired fence before. I don't want to have to scramble to put enough wire together to keep steers in the pasture, again.

I fix fence when the sun shines and retreat to the house when storms blow in. During spring storms, I read or write or play my guitar. I participate in my daughters' education, which proceeds according to a schedule Laura has worked out and also not according to a schedule, but according to interest. Questions about a hundred topics swirl inside the house as snow in the wind swirls around the house. We adults answer the questions, or any or all of us dig into books seeking answers and make notes for questions we need to answer next trip to Baker's library. Our daughters often answer questions or find answers as well as we adult, supposed teachers, do.

Storms blow away east and leave open sky and sunshine. We drop everything and stampede outside. After a long winter, we look for every possible time outside in spring sunshine.

Amanda and Juniper run past the clothesline to the lushly greening grass of "ever-happy land." Laura and I stand together in warm sunshine and watch them. I decide I'd better move or I'll fall into the deep laziness of soaking up spring sunshine without thought or motion. I say, "I'm going to go irrigate."

Juniper and Amanda run and catch up with me. “We want to go with you. The grass in ever-happy land is still wet.”

We drive the pickup down the gravel county road and turn Dry Creek onto the sawmill field. Dry Creek flows from north slope, down between ponderosa pine trees, juniper trees, and sage brush. The creek will dry up in June. If I use it well now by spreading it across all the meadow I can, the water will add green grass to the meadow.

Amanda and Juniper explore while I work on the big ditch that spreads Dry Creek across the meadow after the water runs under the road. They wander where interest takes them. I walk down the road from Dry Creek and pack dirt into the cut in the bank I dug last summer to turn water aside so the meadow would dry enough that we could get machinery onto it to cut the hay.

Water from the springs among the aspen trees along the west edge of the buck pasture flows down the ditch that runs through a culvert under the road and onto the sawmill field. I drop to my hands and knees and look through the culvert to see if it's clear of obstructions.

It isn't, but the obstruction is temporary. A porcupine hides from me in the culvert. There isn't enough water to wash the porcupine out nor to drown it. When it realizes I've gone, it will come out of the culvert and go on with its wanderings.

I cross the road. Juniper and Amanda run from the wide meadow below the road, where they have wandered and explored, and join me. I shovel weeds and settled mud from the ditch as we walk down the field toward the old sawmill.

Water soaks roots, waters green grasses, irrigates a habitat for dozens of wild animals. Deer and elk will browse through here all spring and summer. After we cut and remove the hay,

in late summer, cattle, deer, and elk will graze the stubble, the edges of the fields, and all the places we can't get to with machinery.

As we walk and work down the ditch, Amanda and Juniper make up and act out a play full of various characters having adventures. The ditch starts water onto the meadow the way I want it to, so we hike back up the field toward the road and the pickup and drive home.

Sunny days, the temperature climbs toward sixty degrees. Some days, storms blow down from the mountain. Snow blows in the wind, and the temperature doesn't reach thirty degrees.

I ride the motorcycle to Camp Creek field. I deepen and widen ditches. I walk down the meadow and build mud dams to spill water from the ditches until water flows across the Camp Creek meadow the way I want it to. If I would shovel a lot of dirt along the end of the ditch, I could get water onto two or three acres of ground that doesn't grow much hay without it. I file it in my mind under "possible projects." I have plenty of other work to do.

The first year I irrigated, I shoveled dirt piled long ago beside the big ditch above the barn onto a flatbed wagon, tracted it to the top of Camp Creek Field, unloaded it, and rebuilt the dike that had washed away years before. Rebuilding the dike brought about forty acres back under irrigation.

For years before I got here, the crew from the home ranch cut hay along the swales in this field and let it go at that. Now hay grows densely on the entire field, so if the shovel work here never comes out of the "possible" file, nothing is lost.

Juniper says, "We saw two mountain bluebirds in the sagebrush across the road."

Amanda says. “We saw a meadow lark the other side of the barn, up by the big ditch.”

The next day, I see a male bluebird on the corral railing. He establishes territory and sings to female bluebirds about the future of their species. Two days later, I fix a hole in the fence where Dry Creek flows under, and a meadow lark serenades me from a nearby pine tree.

Some days, I take Juniper or Amanda with me on the motorcycle. Some days I take both of them with me in the pickup. They explore widely, or they stay close to me, and we talk about myriad subjects.

I wade along the fence around the field south of the house, through the marsh, and tighten sagging wires. Knee deep in cold mud, I tell myself, come late summer, when we’ve cut, baled, and hauled the hay and this marsh is as dry as it will get, I need to replace a few rotted-off posts.

Come late summer, I’ll be cleaning ditches and cutting firewood. I won’t want to take the time to work on a fence that won’t have cattle against it for months, but if I remind myself how easily steers can slip through a fence that isn’t tight enough to sound a middle C and well posted, I’ll do it.

I asked John once, “You got somebody training these steers to escape?”

“You bet. Nothing much to do down there in the winter, so when we finish morning chores, we teach yearlings to get through fences.” Morning chores include feeding 1,500 cattle, breaking ice so they can drink, fighting with machinery to keep it running in cold weather, doctoring animals, taking care of the horses, all the tasks it takes to run a ranch, and those basic chores take ten or twelve hours, a lot of the time.

Early on a warm and sunny morning, I drive down the

county road south and turn east onto a dirt road that takes me along the ridge rising to the east boundary of the ranch. The snow has melted from the ridge there, miles from anyone, up in second and third growth ponderosa pine that gives way in places to sage brush, sparsely-grassed open meadow, and juniper trees. Sometimes, I'm startled that I get a check every month for doing the work I love to do, for living up in the country I love, for living the way I want to live.

Mountain bluebirds, nuthatches, juncos, jays, magpies and ravens fly, eat from the earth's bounty, and sing all around me. They court, build nests, and discuss territorial boundaries. Widely varied songs of spring fill the clear mountain air around me.

I carry tools, wire and posts beyond where I can drive. The slope falls too steeply to drive the pickup farther. Trees grow densely, and blown-down trees jackstraw close to and onto the fence. I try to repair the walk-in places when sunshine is sure, but sunshine is never really sure in this country in spring.

Down in a steep draw, shaded snow lingered, two feet deep. I broke through the crust almost to my knees and waded across to clear ground.

The sun disappeared behind clouds. Wet snow blew in serious wind. I spliced broken barbed wire and tightened slack barbed wire. Snow increased. I left my tools and materials on the ground and ran for the pickup, along the side of the ridge, down through the steep draw, across the snow, up steep slope. Wet snow caressed me with promises of freeddom. I climbed into the pickup. The wind died. Clouds opened, and the sun shone bright and warm. In the solar oven the pickup became with all the windows rolled up and the sun shining in, I warmed all the way through.

I stepped out of the truck and stood in sunshine. My clothes finished drying.

I dedicated a long moment in warm sunshine near the top of the ridge to gratitude for spring, that brought us work, monthly checks again, invigorating wind, snow, and cold rain, and parts of days of warm sunshine when we lived more outside and began to garden toward the future. I cultivated deep gratitude for wildlife, grass, forbs, trees, birds, hooved animals, animals with claws, everything growing and reproducing and promising a lovely and vigorous future.

Two hawks flew, turning, diving, and rising, through the trees to my left, where branches grew so close together, I couldn't see how the birds could get through at all, let alone at full speed in quick pursuit of the future of their species.

Then I headed back down the steep slope. I picked up my tools and went back to work. More than half a spring day's afternoon still lay ahead of me. I removed fence wires from rotted-off wooden posts, drove steel posts into the ground, tightened the wires, and attached them to the steel posts.

Late afternoon, I carried out my tools and materials, loaded them into the pickup, and drove toward home. A coyote ran from the sawmill field across the road and up the rocky ridge east of the field. He scrambled over the rocks in a real hurry, and looked over his shoulder. He knew he'd made a mistake, letting anyone in a pickup get that close to him.

I said, "Relax. I'm not like most ranch hands you hear about. I don't shoot coyotes." He disappeared over the hill.

Coyotes' paths and mine intersect. I'm never quite sure what they're up to, nor what they are. Usually, they are more sure about what I am, a man, and many men shoot coyotes at any opportunity, so they don't wait to cultivate my acquaintance. But it doesn't always go like that.

In the spring, several years ago, I cleared blown-down trees from the fence on the west boundary of the ranch, stretched barbed wire tight, spliced it, and fastened it to posts. Every day, my dog and I heard a coyote yap, short, high-pitched barks, in the timber on the ridge above us. The fourth day, a half-mile down the fence from where we first heard it, the coyote appeared several times, a hundred feet or two hundred feet away, in different places, as if seeing us from several different angles would make us more sensible to it. It yapped four or five times each time it was in view. I couldn't think of anything to say in response, and my dog stayed quiet and close.

The coyote came closer yet, and my dog went to investigate. When he got within ten feet, the coyote charged him, low and fast. The dog retreated to me in haste, coyote close behind. I knew there was no danger and yet, I had a moment of fear when the coyote came close. I'm not clear of my trained, human reactions. The coyote stopped about fifteen feet from me, turned, and trotted up the hill into the timber. Several times in the remaining five or six days I worked on that fence, we heard it yap, and we saw it twice more, though not within a hundred yards.

Coyotes get blamed for more crimes than they commit. A professional hunter told me, "Sheep die different ways. They stampede into a fence and break their necks, or they fall off a cliff, or they eat poison weeds, lots of different ways. Coyotes get wind of dead meat, and they come to help clean up. Then the boss drives up. Sheep carcasses. Coyote going over the hill. She tells me, 'Kill more coyotes.' No matter what I say, she's going to keep thinking coyotes killed the sheep. I'm not saying coyotes won't kill sheep. They got no moral code against it, but it isn't always an easy job, and they

might get banged around some in the process, so most of them choose an easier living.”

It’s an easier living for coyotes to eat voles, mice, ground squirrels, birds, berries. The same ranchers who shoot coyotes on sight bemoan the loss of alfalfa to ground squirrels, voles, and mice. They also get fighting mad at anyone who speaks in defense of coyotes, so I don’t say much.

Coyotes will make meals of bovine calves if they can, but they rarely kill one. Cows protect their calves fiercely, and they protect their calves in groups. I’ve seen angry cows chase coyotes, but I’ve never seen coyotes chase cows.

Coyotes don’t usually come very close to the house we live in. But two did, a winter night when our dog was so sick many who saw him thought he would die. Laura put him on a rug in the back room, so she could take care of him easily. About midnight, two coyotes howled from quite close, in the back yard, maybe a hundred feet from the house. They worked up their best, most spine-tingling howling. We waited. They did it again, and then we didn’t hear them the rest of the night. We knew they said something about or to the dog, but we hadn’t any idea what it was.

I don’t know if the dog understood it either. He recovered to herd many more cows, but he never taught me anything about coyotes.

Coyotes survive. They don’t make a lasting mark on the world, except in our minds. They are the stuff of legends.

Taking the Long Way Home

The sun rises into the clear sky. The last snow melts from the meadow. Everything goes to mud. I work just inside the big, open south doors of the barn, striking wedges with a sledge hammer to split western larch into fence posts and material for rock jacks. The sound of metal striking metal rings through the morning. The smell of freshly-split larch permeates the air.

Juniper and Amanda went by the barn an hour or two ago, headed up the hill north of the barn. Now Laura calls them from the house. I walk out to where I can see them and relay the call, “Mama says it’s time to come home,” and they respond, “Okay, we’re on our way.”

I slip and slide through slick mud in the corral back into the barn and start nailing rock jack frames together. After a while, I become aware that Amanda and Juniper haven’t passed the barn on their way home yet. I walk through the barn and out the north doors to see what they’re doing. They head home 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’re on their way. Their busy, happy chatter tells me they’ve almost reached the barn. They walk along the top corral rails. When the top rails won’t bear their weight, they walk on the lower rails and hold onto the upper rails. 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 a while since she first called you, so

maybe you'd better quit playing and get on over to the house. It's time to start school."

Amanda says, "Daddy, we are not playing. We're getting there as fast as we can, but Mama told us not to get our shoes muddy."

Juniper says, "This is the only way we can get there without getting our shoes muddy." An admirable goal, steeped in obedience.

However, we need to communicate to avoid 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're already heavily coated. I cross the corral and walk to the house. Laura sees me and comes to the front door and opens it. "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 almost to the river. They followed that ditch, and they got to that area of dense grass in the low ground. They cut across the dense grass 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, too. That put them to the rail fence up to the corrals. They walked along the rails to the place where the fence is down. Coming across all those boards down in the grass takes some time, because they have to watch for nails. Then they can get back on the fence, but that's slow going, because they have to navigate two gates. They probably had to get the gates fastened better before they could walk along them. From there, they have to go almost clear around the corral to the chute, then along the top of the chute. 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 have my boots and socks off, and I barefoot into the kitchen to see if there’s 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’ve almost finished my cup of tea when they thunder up onto the porch and in the front door. Their shoes aren’t totally clean, but they are free of caked-up mud. Laura says, “Take your shoes off, and let’s get going on school.”

And me, though I have to walk a direct and muddy route back to my necessary adult work soon, I finish my tea, lost in reverie, thinking about my own time, so 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.

I put my boots back on, walk back to the barn, and work on fence materials. I keep looking toward Greenhorn. No clouds come over the mountain by midmorning. It’s the warmest day we’ve had so far, so I bring the motorcycle out of the barn, strap a shovel and a pitchfork onto the luggage rack, and ride down the road. The river runs too high to ford, so I ride down, cross the bridge, turn onto the rutted dirt road, and climb the ridge. Snow lies along the east sloping hill, where trees shade the road. I ride through the drifts, stop, open the gate, and ride down onto the edge of the meadow. The grass on the meadow grows deep green.

About twenty pairs of geese congregate between me and the river. I think these geese nest close, along the river in the willows and along the sloughs the other side of the river, between the river and the old mill, but I’ve never seen their

nests. I like to see birds and other wild animals, but I bother them as little as I can, and I'm sure searching for their nests would bother them. I ride above the top edge of their congregating area. The closest ones walk away from me. A few take to wing, fly up the meadow close to the river and drop to the ground again.

The road takes me through timber along the west boundary fence, then back down onto the meadow. Only a trickle of water flows from the spring at the edge of the timber. The springs are drying out earlier than usual. I ride past the spring and down onto the meadow. Water from the big ditch that flows about a mile and a half down through the timber spreads well all the way from the timber to the river, but some areas still stand dry.

I park the motorcycle, unstrap my shovel, cut narrow spots in a small ditch wider, and use the dirt to build up the banks. I pack the dirt into place with the back of the shovel.

Two fledgling snipes (*capella gallinago*) freeze, motionless, in the grass ahead of me. I dig toward them. When I'm within three feet of the snipes, one of them runs away and disappears into the growing grass. The other snipe sits tight. I pat mud into place on the bank across an eight-inch wide ditch full of water from it, and it doesn't stir a feather. Then I pat mud into place on the bank it occupies. I place dirt eight inches from it, then eight inches from it on the other side. Now it sits in water flowing out what has become the low spot in the bank.

I work away from the snipe, up the ditch to the feeder ditch. I strap the shovel onto the motorcycle, ride half a mile up the meadow, and clean branches and pine needles out of another ditch. I wonder which snipe is more likely to survive, the one who ran, or the one who froze. Will the one who ran

freeze next time?

The snipe that froze on the bank of the ditch is many snipes' territories from the pair who courted, early this spring, at the edge of the seep behind the house. I sat by the fence and watched. Twenty feet below me, snow formed a twenty-foot long walkway for the two small birds. They rapidly walked the length of the snow patch, in step with each other, always about three inches apart, and disappeared into the grass beyond the snow. In less than a minute, they walked out of the grass, onto the snow, down the length of the snow, and into the grass at that end. They soon reappeared, walking quickly south again.

Male and female Wilson's snipes look alike. They are of the sandpiper family, brown and white, with orange to yellow flecking, orange tails in flight, long beaks and long legs, about ten inches tall. The book says the female averages heavier and a longer beak than the male, but I'd had to have had a tape measure and a scale to distinguish one from the other. I didn't know if the male or the female led, nor if the one who led this time followed another time.

Knowing nothing, I was fascinated enough to stay more than half an hour. In that time, their actions never varied. They seemed very serious, totally devoted to performing their function as birds, as two particular Wilson's snipes. I had work to do, so I couldn't stay, but when I checked back three hours later, they were still walking, or walking again.

Wilson's snipes fly high into the sky and then oscillate toward the ground. The birds extend two feathers horizontally from their tails as they swoop back and forth and descend at high speed. The feathers vibrate against the air and make a rapid hooohooohoo sound that carries well and could be taken for demented laughter.

The book says males and females dive and sound off as part of their courtship and to identify their territory to others of the species. I think they also do it just for the joyous sound of it. They continue with it all the time they're in the valley, long after they finish their courtship, mating, and nesting for the year. They keep it up for hours at a time, at night, in the evenings and mornings, and on cloudy days.

When we first moved here, I sometimes became irritated at the snipes' constant noise. The snipes didn't care about my opinion; they did what they were going to do anyway, so I practiced appreciating their noise. I've come to enjoy this joyful sound, their expression of their exuberance of existence.

Snipes eat insects, small crustaceans, and worms. They probe deep into mud with their long, sensitive beaks and find food. They dodge and dart when they fly. When flushed from cover, they usually don't fly far before they drop back into cover. Especially fledglings. They trust concealment more than flight.

That habit makes me nervous. One way of looking at it is, the irrigation work I do makes a lot of ideal habitat for Wilson's snipes. They like marshy areas and the edges of marshes. I have to use the motorcycle to cover enough ground to do the irrigation that creates hundreds of acres of marshy and grassy ground. I don't know that I've smashed snipes under motorcycle tires because they froze instead of running.

I irrigate to grow hay, and we will cut and bale the hay. I don't like to start cutting the hay early. I like to wait until the snipes are older and will fly farther from danger. Young snipes dive back into dense grass too close in front of the swather. I slow the machine. I don't know what the little

birds do down in deep grass where I can't see them. Run hell bent for feather, I hope. I don't know that we've swathed snipes. I have seen chopped snakes, voles, and ground-squirrels in the hay we leave windrowed behind us as we mow meadow grass.

I ride the motorcycle up to the big ditch in the timber, leave it on its stand, walk up along the ditch, and clear pine needles and pull branches out. Trees have fallen across and into this ditch, too. I clear what I can from the flow of water, but I'll have to bring my chainsaw over and clear the down trees.

Before I spend much time taking care of little problems here and there, I need to see how all the water I turned from the river two days ago spreads across the meadow. I want to see if any problems need work to keep them from getting bigger and harder to handle. A little flow of water through a squirrel hole in the bank of a ditch can become a big chunk of bank washed away and a major piece of hard labor if it runs for long.

All the way up the ranch, water spreads across the greening meadow the way I want it to. I need to do some shovel work here and there, but most of it can wait a few days. I ride around the small stand of lodgepole that grows out into the meadow.

A coyote enjoying the open meadow sees me and flees for the timber. I stop and watch. The coyote lifts its feet high as it runs. Water runs across the ground the coyote crosses, and if it keeps its feet low, water will trip it or slow it down. Even when they're not running through water, coyotes don't run much like dogs. Dogs focus their attention on a goal and run full speed toward it without paying much attention to what else goes on around them.

The effort to wipe out coyotes hasn't abated since ex Europeans first arrived on this continent. To survive, coyotes have to be able to observe everything around them as they run, and they have to be able to change their plans immediately. A coyote can observe the trail behind it without breaking from a full-speed-to-save-my-life gallop. A coyote can change from predator after its prey to fleeing prey in mid stride.

The coyote running for the timber looks at me too much. Its curiosity puts it in danger. If I were a coyote killer, I'd have had plenty of time to drop it. I want to tell it, "Forget trying to figure out what I'm doing. Just get into cover fast." This one is young and not as wise as it needs to be. It will gain wisdom rapidly as it ages.

Different animals react differently to me. Ducks never trust me. They're into the air and gone before they think to ask, "Who is it? Do we know him?" Sandhill cranes are usually very wary, though I have been close to them a few times.

One spring, Laura, Juniper, Amanda, and I walked up the Camp Creek field, exploring the day. A big drainage ditch, heavily grown with coarse, tall grass and a dozen varieties of brush and tall weeds, lay along the base of the hill on the east side of the field. Far up the field, two cranes fed along the ditch. We walked toward them. Long before we got close enough to alarm the cranes, they walked rapidly away from the big ditch. Curious about why they left, I walked farther, until a coyote broke from cover in the ditch and galloped up the hill.

I don't think coyotes eat sandhill cranes here. Every year, we have only one or two pairs, and they make it through the season until migration takes them south again, though I don't

know if all the young they hatch in Whitney Valley make it through and migrate.

A whistling swan lives on the meadow this year. Swans have stopped here some springs, on their way somewhere else, but this one stays around. It's changing from grey to white on its neck, and that means it's coming into maturity. I wonder if it is ill or injured. It only flies low to the ground, as if it can't gain altitude, and it never flies very far at a time, in contrast to swans' usual sharply upward and away flights when they're alarmed.

I'm concerned about the swan, but I don't know anything I can do to help it if it is ill or injured. I give the birds and other animals here all the room I can, and I try not to interfere with them. Beyond that, they're in greater hands than mine.

The swan's approachable distance is about ten times as far as geese, even farther than ducks. Geese, ducks, and cranes sometimes flatten out in the grass, seeking concealment. It's amazing how low to the ground these big birds can get, what short grass they can hide in. It's funny to see them do it when the grass is too short but they don't realize it. I think they take their cue from the predator. They're hidden if the predator doesn't come after them.

I ride out of my way to avoid bothering the swan. It doesn't need me running it up and down the meadow. After about ten days, I don't see it anymore.

Early this spring, Laura, Juniper, Amanda, and I walked down to the mill pond. We thought no birds swam on the pond, and we abandoned our caution, unaware until they took to wing that the high pond bank concealed a dozen swans. They flew so close above us, we heard their wings creak through the air.

After the coyote leaves the flooded meadow behind and

disappears into timber, I drop the motorcycle into gear again and ride to the top of the ranch. When high water in the main ditch runs into the ditch branching from it just below the boundary fence, it's too close to flowing over the dirt covering the culverts. These culverts washed out last summer. When we finished harvesting hay from the meadows, I brought up the backhoe and the dump truck and reset the culverts. Now, I shovel dirt from the pile I dumped from the truck last fall and walk on it to pack it. It will hold.

Every day for a while, I'll ride up the ranch and build up the low spot more. Then I'll ride farther up, onto Rico's ranch, and I'll check the log-crib dam that turns this ditch's water from the river. From there, I'll work down the ranch, clearing ditches, widening ditches, changing the flow of water to get the meadow soaked while there's plenty of water.

I rode up the ranch on bench ground, so I ride down on low ground below the bench. I stop and clear pine needles from ditches. The kickstand sinks into wet ground, and the bike falls over. I pick it back up, ride along the river, and find a flat piece of wood, left by high water, to put under the kickstand. I remind myself to take it with me when I go, for my next stop, where there might not be a piece of wood.

Getting all the routines of the work into action, like carrying a piece of wood to put under the stand, takes a while. I learn some things again every spring. Sometimes I get irritated with myself because I don't remember some of the details that make working on the meadow easier. Sometimes, I'm delighted that so much is new again every year.

A great blue heron stands in the river in front of dense willow bushes growing on the low bank. It sees me and takes

to wing; long, curving wings stroke much deeper down past horizontal than a crane's. It curves its neck to hold its head close to its body as it flies. Great blue herons are very wary birds. I usually see them after they become alarmed, take to the air, and fly away from me.

I ride up to the west boundary of the ranch, where the ridge rises above the meadow. Great blue herons nest high in a dead lodgepole, inside the timber a ways. I stop to shovel a ditch, out on the meadow from their nesting area. I hear the deep croak of a great blue heron and the higher croak of a raven, and I turn and look. Apparently, there has been a confrontation between the heron and a raven in the air, and the raven flies away, posthaste.

The heron lowers itself through dead branches where I thought it couldn't fit, legs extended down, wings arched above, and gracefully settles into its nest of sticks forty feet above the ground.

I ride back to the ditch where I left the fledgling snipe, and the snipe has gone. It cost me nothing to allow it to leave in its own way, in its own time, and it brought me the rewarding feeling that I'm keeping my interference with wildlife minimal and still getting the necessary work done. I fill in the low spot in the ditch bank, and that ditch begins to soak the point that has stood dry.

I've been irrigating the meadow about four hours. Everything this side of the river is in good enough shape to hold a while, and I'm hungry, so I head for home. I ride toward Aspen Spring, on the west edge of the meadow.

Alarmed by my approach, two eagles take to wing. The first one carries a varying hare. The eagle can't gain altitude. It drops the hare in the grass. I turn and ride away and then stop and watch. The second eagle flies back and tries to pick

up the hare, without success. The first eagle returns to the hare. The eagles fly in and out of sunlight and shadow, and I'm not sure if they're golden eagles, lighter than the dark chocolate of immature bald eagles, or immature bald eagles.

Bald eagles don't develop white heads and tails until they mature. These eagles can't carry the hare. Maybe they're immature, though varying hares, also known as jackrabbits, can be heavy. Two eagles hunting together might mean they're a mating pair and therefore mature and therefore golden eagles, since they don't have the white heads and tails.

If I could get closer, I might be able to tell for sure what they are, but if I get closer, they will abandon their prey and flee. I'm thrilled enough that I've seen two eagles. I don't need to know for sure what kind they are.

The ridge rising steeply west of the meadow has kept me from seeing the western mountains since I left the top of the ranch, but when I ride away from the eagles on the open meadow and look west, I crank the throttle open and head for home. A storm slips down the mountain. Falling snow already obscures the western end of the valley.

Riding home in rain or snow blowing in a hard wind builds wonderful memories and gives me stories to tell, but when I'm doing it, riding a motorcycle in a storm is unpleasant and cold, nearly a paralyzing experience, so I try to spot the storms and beat them home.

I ride down the road, onto the county road, across the bridge, and full throttle toward home, because the wind is up, and snow blows in the wind. Snow increases and stings my face. I tuck my head down and ride with my eyes almost closed, but still the wet snow stings my face and eyes. Wet snow blurs my vision and begins to soak through my

clothing. I stop, put on my poncho, tie it tight around me with baling twine, and start again.

I'm awfully cold, but I make it into the yard, put the motorcycle on its stand, run into the house, and stop next to the kitchen stove, where Laura grills cheese sandwiches. She says, "You timed that just right."

"I didn't time it. The snowstorm drove me home. From now until July, I'm going to load the motorcycle into the pickup and drive as close as I can get to where I'm going to work and then ride the motorcycle from there. Then I can retreat to the pickup if a storm comes up."

Some History of Whitney Valley

The north fork of the Burnt River rushes east down Greenhorn Mountain and slows in the top of Whitney Valley. Two miles from the top of the valley, Camp Creek flows into the river where the river curves south in the widening valley. Where Camp Creek Valley joins the Burnt River Valley, the meadow spreads nearly a mile wide. South of that confluence a mile, flowing from the east, Dry Creek, seasonally, and Trout Creek, a half mile below Dry Creek, flow into the Burnt River. Whitney Valley along the Burnt River is about three and a half miles long, narrowing and then terminating just south of Trout Creek in high bluffs that close the river into a canyon.

Some say prehistoric, half-ton beavers dammed the river where it flows between the bluffs. Sediment in the lake-sized pond built the deep, rich, clay-based soil in the valley.

Early in the twentieth century, men cut the big virgin timber from the ridges above Whitney Valley, ponderosa pine, western larch, and Douglas fir trees, with two-man hand saws and axes. They built a mill on the meadow in Whitney Valley, where a spring flows and fills the mill pond they dug.

Horses pulled logs from the steep ridges surrounding the valley to narrow-gauge railroad spurs. Men, horses, and machines loaded logs onto railroad cars, and steam locomotives pulled the loaded cars to the mill.

People built a town in Whitney Valley. Loggers, teamsters, firewood cutters cutting fuel for the locomotives and stove wood for the towns the railroad reached lived here. Hewers of ties for more railroad track, track layers, men to take care of the logging horses, mill workers, mechanics,

children, teachers of children, cooks, carpenters, sorters and loaders of lumber, mill-pond workers, irrigators of the meadow, teams of horses and teams of men who cut and stacked hay to feed the logging horses through the winter, hunters, trappers, prospectors, bartenders, hotel keepers all lived in town or came in to trade, socialize, and find entertainment.

Loggers cut the last of the big timber. Mill workers sawed the logs to lumber. The train hauled the lumber away. The mill shut down, and the people left. The town died, but the ranch continued, as a cattle ranch.

Some of the houses in Whitney valley burned. People loaded houses on railroad cars and hauled them down to Baker Valley. Scavengers took apart buildings for materials. A few of the old buildings still stand. The old mill begins to collapse as fasteners of the western larch timbers give way. Our house is little different from the abandoned houses no longer in use, never painted, or the paint long ago weathered away.

Guy Miller uses the small cabin across the road from us every spring. He lives on a farm near Jacksonville, Oregon in the winter and in the cabin here in the valley in the spring, until the snow melts from the road up the mountain and he can set up his tent at Greenhorn for the summer. And then, "When the geese go south, I go south." He begins the circle again.

Guy was born in 1902. A small, thin man, with tanned, weathered face and hands and white hair now, he lived here when Whitney was a thriving town. He hewed ties for the narrow-gauge railroad for ten cents a tie. "If you worked hard, you could make a good wage. I did. I had all the money I needed." Guy never married. He served in the army in

World War One, but he didn't go to war. He had asthma, and the army discharged him with a pension. He has rarely worked since. He doesn't see any sense in working if he can get by on what he has, and he does get by, without much excess, but with enough.

Guy watches the century pass from a distance. He's interested in the places he lives and a few of the people who live in those places. He's aware of the larger world, but not very interested in it. He reads western novels in his small cabin, cooks his meals on a portable gas stove, and keeps a fire going most of the time in the wood-fired heater.

Some sunny days, he takes his fishing gear, finds a few worms in partially submerged cow manure and goes fishing in Camp Creek or in the Burnt River. If his catch is good, he eats one or two of the smallest fish and gives the rest to Laura. We have had fish as the main course of several meals, courtesy of Guy.

Juniper and Amanda were afraid of him at first. He speaks gruffly, and he teases them. We haven't teased much in our family, so they didn't understand his teasing at first, and they kept a distance from him. They began to understand his gruffness and his teasing were just his way, and they often go over to see him.

He says "I like kids. Don't have much use for most grownups, but I like kids." Laura and I seem to have gained his approval. He particularly likes Laura. He calls her "The Missus," and he likes to talk with her about every other day. Sometimes he comes over for a visit and finds her gone. He asks "Where's the Missus?" He looks around, as if looking will bring her back from where she has gone, and when she doesn't appear, he walks back to his cabin.

When Laura comes home, I say, "Guy came to see you. I

don't think he approved of you being gone when he went to the trouble of coming over for a visit." She walks across the road to let him know she's back and to talk with him.

Guy showing up in the spring every year is almost like one of the species of migratory birds coming back to the valley. We look for him and become concerned if he's late. Sometime after the first of the migrating species of birds arrive back in Whitney Valley but before the late species fly in, Guy pulls into the driveway across the county road and begins to unload his pickup.

The second year he showed up, I walked over and asked him, "Do you need help with some of that, Guy?"

He said, "No, I can manage this. Always have."

Before he finished unloading, I realized asking him if he needed help wasn't the way to do it, because he would say no, he didn't need help, regardless of the situation, so I just reached into the back of the pickup and started unloading some of the heaviest of his possessions, and he didn't object.

The years go by, and he slows down. I walk over soon after he arrives, help him unload his pickup, and help him set up his woodstove and the pipe that goes up from it through the roof. He thanks me and gives me a cup of coffee. I drink coffee with him and then leave and let him finish putting his cabin in order.

We use his cabin for storage, for a playhouse, for a retreat, to shelter guests when he's on Greenhorn Mountain or south, in Jacksonville.

Next to his cabin stands the remnant of the old ranch house, the largest house in the valley, gutted for materials. Even the ceiling joists have been cut out of that house.

South of us a hundred yards an old cabin, with newer aluminum siding, has the only phone in Whitney Valley, an

old, crank telephone. John and Mike use that cabin when they come up. They let friends and relatives use the cabin during hunting seasons. John gave us a key to the cabin so we can use the phone.

The corrals are north of our house fifty yards, and the barn stands north of them and is part of the northern fence of the largest corral. The barn sheltered 16 teams of horses, hay, tack, and equipment when the loggers cut trees from the ridges surrounding Whitney Valley. After the place became a cattle ranch, the barn sheltered horses during haying, before machines took over the work of haying. Sometimes now, the barn shelters hay and equipment and riding horses between times of working cattle.

The barn became one of Amanda's and Juniper's play houses, one I'm sure any child would enjoy, with its loft, feed chutes, stalls, feed room, a hundred places to hide, to explore, and to climb.

On this ranch in the early nineteen-hundreds, teams of horses pulled machines whose wheels turned gears that drove sickle bars that cut the hay. Teams of horses pulled rakes and big forks that picked up the hay. Men, and teams of horses powering machines, raised the hay into stacks.

Early mornings in harvest time, men drove team after team of horses out onto the meadow to begin work before sunrise. Breath from horses and from men steamed in the cold morning air. Teams maneuvered into position and worked. Hay fell to sickle bars as the sun rose over Cottonwood Butte and warmed all the men and horses at work. Workers built haystacks above the stubble on the meadow.

Ranchers "neighbored" to bring together enough men, horses, and machines to harvest the hay.

Two horses and two men moved hay from the stacks to the feeding ground in winter. John told me, “If a storm dumped more than about a foot of snow, the teamster drove the horses around the stack and out to the feed ground and then back. They just pulled a singletree the first time and broke a trail through the snow. Then they hooked up the sled and loaded their hay, and drove out to the feed ground and threw hay off the sled to the cattle.”

Mike said, “Johnny stayed up here one winter and fed out. He liked it for about a week, and then he wished he was doing something else. After that, we always brought the cattle down home and fed them. It’s warmer down home anyway. Takes half as much hay to winter a cow down at Unity.” Cows digest hay to stay warm. The colder it gets, the more hay they need.

Early tractors simply replaced horses as pulling power for implements that had been pulled behind horses. John and Mike weren’t interested in that step of modernization and only adopted more mechanical methods of work, conservatively, as more developed machinery became available.

It may be popular to think all the changes toward more industrialization were good, and any steps toward less mechanization would be undesirable, but the earth tells me a different story.

To free men and animals for World Wars 1 and 2, to supply food to Europe in both wars, we mechanized to achieve manpower-efficient agricultural production. After the wars ended, we didn’t put the surplus human power freed from the needs of war back into agricultural production. We had become the industrial culture. After W.W.2, instead of shutting down armaments factories, as we did after W.W.1,

we kept improving and manufacturing weapons, for defense and for sale to other countries. The sale of weapons brought large profits, and manufacturing kept people working so they could buy the consumer goods produced by factories converted from weapons manufacturing or started new to manufacture automobiles, washers and dryers, refrigerators and freezers, boats, garden machines, radios, televisions.

If the earth survives, it will be because mankind recognizes war is war against the earth and eliminates the destructiveness and energy profligacy of war. If we make that change, we will be able to retreat from the most destructive results of the industrial revolution and give the earth breathing space. The moral structure will be in place to further refine our approach to the earth until we achieve balance with all life.

Places like this valley, where abundant wildlife lives relatively undisturbed, are rare. Even here, the pressure of the industrial society eats into wildlife habitat. Highway 6 runs through Whitney Valley. Men with machines paved the highway the third year we lived here, and it became a main route through northeastern Oregon. It rumbles the earth with its trucks and cars and adds pollution to the air.

Loggers cut trees, skid them to landings and haul them away on trucks. We harvest hay. Cattle usurp the place of wildlife in the forests. The consuming culture channels all land, all activities into earning. Everything pays its way in the industrial world.

Loggers cut and haul some of the second and third growth timber on the ridges west of the ranch every year, just enough to hold the contract. When timber prices improve, they will log the ridges more rapidly.

Supposedly, Forest Service regulations have improved

logging techniques since the early part of the century. Actually, the improvement is largely theoretical, because machinery tears up the ground and opens it to erosion much more than logging with horses did. The extensive use of heavy equipment brings more pollution and much faster logging than the more primitive methods. The forests rapidly give way to the needs of the industrial society.

Some helpful regulation occupies official papers. Eagles built a nest in a tree on the first ridge west of the ranch. The Forest Service requires loggers to stay a safe distance from the nest during nesting season. Regulations protect soil and streams, though they are sometimes unenforceable or unenforced regulations.

Logging not in the nesting season could so damage the environment the eagles no longer care to nest in the lonely tree. Logging could damage the environment enough that eagles have too sparse a habitat to survive.

Sheltering a Family's Dreams

The house we moved into in Whitney Valley had three small rooms and a twelve by sixteen foot bunkhouse earlier occupants had moved against the west side of the house from across the road. The bunkhouse roof leaked onto broken ceiling joists. I didn't exaggerate much when I said a thirty mile an hour wind outside meant a fifteen mile an hour wind through the back room.

Earlier inhabitants of the house had covered most of the inside of the three most usable rooms with weathered, dark, barn wood. I know weathered exterior wood used for interior finish is fashionable and can be attractive, but it doesn't work very well where the only lighting is from kerosene lamps.

I removed most of the barn wood. I removed the wall between the living room and the kitchen and created a more open, lighter interior. We sealed the air-leaking, uninsulated walls with whatever we could find, including newspapers and cardboard, and we put up light colored wallpaper in the living room and painted some surfaces white.

Summer hit. Whitney Valley heated up. We had only the wood-fired stove for cooking. Summer nights turned cold, and we welcomed an early morning fire to cook breakfast and to warm the house, but fires later in the day heated the house too hot.

I built a fireplace of rocks in front of the house and covered it with the steel top of a fifty-gallon drum to cook and heat water.

Bringing everything out from the kitchen to the fireplace and then carrying it back into the kitchen made more work, so I cooked, heated water, and carried stuff in and out as

much as I could and still do the ranch work and keep building the garden. I'd had plenty of experience, most of it good, cooking outside. I enjoyed cooking on an outdoor fire.

Smoke blew into Laura's face. She knelt or squatted to work. She was too hot on the side close to the fire and too cold on the side away from the fire. Every stray wind blew heat around and blew dust into our food. She had to go into the house to the kitchen shelves for anything she needed. Juniper and Amanda happily helped, but they were small, and they couldn't reach many of the needed supplies and couldn't carry heavy stuff. I got busier and busier with ranch work and gardening, and I didn't have much time to help with household chores.

For Laura, cooking outside added chores to arduous chores. She took the cooking back inside, despite the heat. I opened my mouth to further extol the joys of outdoor cooking, but I shut it again without saying anything. I knew Laura was already facing huge changes. Some of them, she wasn't happy about.

We planned midday meals that didn't need to be cooked, and we didn't worry about it if the house sometimes heated up very hot inside in the afternoons. Cool evenings always came to Whitney Valley. Late afternoon breezes carried the heat away through open windows.

Years later, Laura said, "There were plenty of times I ran to the outhouse so nobody could see me and cried until I couldn't stand the smell of the outhouse anymore. Then I wiped away the tears and went back and tried again."

Before we moved to Whitney, Laura had running water, automatically heated, electrical outlets and lights, a washing machine and a drier. When we moved to Whitney, she left them behind. Friends within a short walk were also of the

past. Life began to seem difficult.

I knew resentment and frustration sometimes soured Laura's time. All I could think of to say was, "Look at the elk and deer and birds; hear the quiet; look at the mountains and the meadows, and keep going.

"If we lived where we had all the conveniences, we wouldn't see all the beauty that surrounds us here. This place and the way we live is really good for kids. For adults too. We need to cultivate gratitude for everything good that comes to us. I think we can find a lot of good here if we work at it."

Laura already worked to appreciate where we were and what we had. She worked harder to leave her moments of despair behind and to find the good coming to us every day. Living in Whitney Valley and finding consistent rewards from the experience got easier for her as our daughters grew and could take care of more of their own needs and could help more with daily chores. It got easier when we bought a better pickup, eventually, and Laura could go get what she needed to get and see who she needed to see.

Living without modern conveniences got easier for Laura when she realized the basic needs and rights of humans do not necessarily nor creatively include all the so-called "basic needs" of the consumer culture, all the conveniences of modern existence. She studied to better understand her spiritual needs and the subjugation of supposed material needs to spiritual needs. She gradually cleared her way for more appreciation of the ranch, nature around us, and our way of living in Whitney Valley.

Juniper and Amanda fit into Whitney Valley as naturally as ducks on the river. The valley and the way we lived perfectly supported their physical, spiritual, and mental growth.

Wild animals and wild plants live abundantly in and around the valley. Our daughters explored as far as their interests and readiness to explore new ground led them. Laura was always available for them.

My work started from our home and stayed on the ranch. I chose my hours of work to fit the family's needs, so I was available to our daughters much of the time. Since I didn't do ranch work during the winter, I lived at home and helped with Amanda's and Juniper's education.

The first summer we lived in Whitney Valley, Laura washed clothes in the galvanized tubs we used for bathing. She agitated the clothes with an antique, hand-held plunger. Amanda and Juniper helped her plunge the laundry. They stomped through the laundry with their bare feet. They soon tired of the project. Laura told them they could run off and find something more interesting to do.

After a great deal of hard work, the clothes came out cleaner than they had been, but Laura decided the gain wasn't worth the hard work. She wanted to be a pioneer, but washing clothes by hand was not an attractive way to become a pioneer.

I thought of trying to put together a gas-motor driven washing machine, but it seemed more practical to drive thirteen miles to Sumpter about once a week to the laundromat. We needed to go in to check the mail, buy groceries, and visit friends and family about once a week in any case.

Two years after we moved to Whitney Valley, we bought a two-burner propane hot plate to free us from some of the wood-fired cookstove use in hot weather. Three years after that, we bought a propane-powered refrigerator to free us from our ice-from-Sumpter routine through the summer.

Tight finances prevented us from buying these devices earlier. When winter shut down ranch work, my checks stopped. John and Mike, good-hearted though they were, wouldn't pay a man who didn't work through the winter.

Though I loved seeing people when we could, I was seldom lonely. I almost always lived enthusiastically in the moment. The joy I experienced with increased intensity after I was injured stayed with me. I usually found good in the situation I was in or found a way to change the situation. My approach to living in Whitney Valley may not have quite fit Laura, but we continued working out our existence together according to what every day asked from us.

Friends, acquaintances, and relatives sometimes assumed we took care of the ranch in the valley entirely because I wanted to be there and to live that kind of life, to be away from other people, to keep our children away from other people, and to live as close to rugged pioneer life as I could. I was largely unaware people around us made those assumptions. My reaction probably would have been to laugh about it and forget it, had I known.

But Laura heard all the questions from the curious about why we lived in Whitney Valley. She received advice from those so ready to advise about how we should change our lives. She encountered pressure from people who wanted all adults and all children to fit the same definitions, to have the same schedules, to be educated the same way and subjected to the same cultural influences. She began to wonder, why are we here with so much of what needs to be done to live and to raise children more difficult for us than it is for most people?

When I realized Laura had started asking the questions of herself that people were asking of her, "Why did Jon choose

this way of life? and why wasn't I included in the decision-making process?" I said, "I thought you understood. How many times have you seen me off my feet for a day or more with physical problems? How long would I last in any job other than a job where the people look to see if the work is done and never ask what hours I work nor how many days I work or don't work?"

"I love this place. I love the job. I love the work I do. I've always loved gardening. This is like taking care of a 1200 acre garden. I love the life we're living. But I didn't plan our way into all this. It was the first and only job I saw that I knew I could do. You've been with me as I tried to do various jobs and couldn't. I would think you'd be able to understand what was happening."

Laura said, "I guess I don't think much about physical problems you have. When you're on your feet and working again, my memory of the problems you had fades. I don't think of you as disabled."

"I'm not disabled. But there are things I can't do or can't do long enough in a row to hold a job. There's plenty I can do, if I'm free to arrange my own schedule and my own techniques, as I am here."

Even though the situation didn't rest well with her some of the time, Laura put the continuation and harmony of the family as highest priority. Her most basic assumption didn't waver. We were in it together. She had doubts about her ability to handle everything she had to handle, especially about her ability, our ability, to educate our daughters adequately, but each time it came time to do what was necessary, she did it. In some ways, Laura is not modern.

John drove up the dusty river road to Whitney to see how things were going. I stood by his pickup in hot sunshine, and

we talked of hay crops, cattle, fences, and summer heat.

I said, "The roof on that house is in pretty bad shape."

"Is it leaking?"

"Hasn't leaked for a couple of months."

"It has been on there a long time."

"What I think about more than leaking is those old, dry, wooden shingles, and a wood stove. If it stays dry like this and gets cold, there's no way to keep some sparks from falling on it."

"It caught fire once. The man living there was walking home, up the county road, and he saw the roof burning. He ran the rest of the way. His family was sitting in there reading."

"How'd they put it out?"

"I don't know. Threw water up there, I guess. We'll have Andy come up and put a metal roof on it. You work with him."

Andy came up and took measurements. I said, "Let's do it right away, Andy."

"It won't snow til late November."

"If we bank on good weather that late, we'll pay for it. It takes a lot longer to put a roof on if you're fighting rain and snow."

So he did get right to it. He brought up materials, power tools, and a generator, and we put a metal roof on while the sun shone warmly.

The second fall we were there, I traded a '57 International pickup with a ruined engine to Bob, a friend of mine, for help rebuilding the back room. John and Mike paid for the materials, and Bob and I worked on the bunkhouse that previous occupants had put against the back of the house. We removed the boards from the inside and outside walls of the

bunkhouse and stapled insulation between the studs, covered the walls with tar paper inside and outside, and put the boards back on. We removed the ceiling boards, replaced the ceiling joists, replaced the boards, insulated the ceiling, and reinforced the two by four structure of the attic.

We nailed down barn wood I had removed from the interior of the other three rooms, and we had an attic floor for storage and a play area. We eliminated the north window in the back room. We built three large windows into the south wall to admit winter sunshine. We installed a door to the outside in the west wall, joined the room structurally to the house, and roofed over the gap between. We built a large doorway between the back room and Amanda's and Juniper's room.

In the doorway, we have access to the ends of the shelves that divide the two rooms. The ends of the shelves form a ladder into the attic. Juniper and Amanda climb the exposed ends of the shelves and jump off. The large doorway lines up with the kitchen doorway, so they can achieve speed before they leap off the higher floor of their room into the back room.

Severe winter weather here doesn't encourage outdoor activity, even with good winter clothes, so Laura and I don't discourage strenuous activity indoors, nor the noise that goes with it. I don't recall this conversation, but Amanda says she heard Jim ask, "How can you concentrate enough to write while the girls are playing in here and making all that noise?"

She says I answered, "Their playing doesn't bother me, as long as they take the corrals and toy animals off my lap when I want to stand up and move them off my chair when I'm ready to sit down again." I could have said, "How could they bother me? They're playing happily. Their happiness is a gift

and a treasure. They are a gift and a treasure.”

John and Mike and men from several ranches sorted cattle they had herded from Forest Service allotments, across the meadow, and into the corrals. Dust rose from the corrals, and cattle bawled. Laura, Juniper, and Amanda worked on geography, history, science, and cursive italics in the kitchen. They sang together and then covered the kitchen table with papers and drew. Bob and I cut and nailed boards. Our hammering punctuated the family’s classes and the songs they sang. Laura called to us, “Hey, you guys get with the rhythm on these songs we’re singing.” Amanda and Juniper laughed and tried to match the rhythm of their songs to the sound of hammers driving nails into wood.

Other ranchers hauled their cattle down the river road in trucks. John and Mike turned their cattle out of the corrals onto the meadow. All the workers left, and the cattle quieted down as they scattered across the meadow and grazed stubble and the grass we couldn’t get to with machinery to cut and bale.

We nailed the last boards onto the back room. Cooler fall sunshine filled Whitney Valley. Bob towed the pickup away.

I built a flue for the back room stove, not according to code, because I didn’t have enough money to buy triple wall pipe, but a safe structure. No pipe passed within two feet of wood. I fastened metal reflectors between the pipe and the wooden structure. I shielded all flammable material more than it needed to be shielded, but I wanted to take no chance of setting the place on fire. If it ever caught, all the ancient, very dry wood would burn in a hurry, with most of what we owned and possibly some of us in it.

It took cultivation of vision to see the place as a good and creative place for us. The place is dusty, especially since

workers paved the highway and it became the major artery through this part of Oregon. People traveling the highway turn down the graveled county road that goes by within a hundred feet of the house, and they raise dust. The dominant wind carries it away from us, but sometimes the wind turns around, or sometimes it stops, and we get a drift of dust from every vehicle that passes. Ranchers don't often work cattle in the corrals, but when they do, cattle and horses raise dust.

No trees grow close to the house. We close curtains on hot days, to keep the sunshine out. If we don't have a fire in the stove, the house stays cool inside. We open the curtains when the afternoon begins to cool.

Tourists drive down the graveled county road to look at what's listed on the maps as a ghost town. It isn't funny anymore when someone pulls into the driveway, points to the map, "Says here this is a ghost town. Are you the ghosts?"

The old mill still stands on the meadow, down the road about a mile from us. The town used to be more than a mile of houses, hotels, bars, post office, jailhouse, assayer's office, down both sides of the road clear to the mill.

Thousands of pictures of the old mill are stuck in albums or exist among loose photos all over the world, from tourists' cameras, and of the Forest Service sign telling about the area, with incorrect dates. Tourists drive up, roll down the window, read the sign aloud to their companions, stick a camera out the window, take a picture of the sign, and drive away, bound for the next interesting place.

Is the world a place of signs and signposts for them? They miss the wild birds that live here, the deer, elk, badgers, coyotes, the stream down in the willows, the long quiet times when peace as deep as the sky settles into the valley. Most of them have far more money than we do, with new cars,

expensive cameras, time and money to travel.

I wouldn't trade places with them for anything in this material world.

Welcome Winter

Nights turned cold. Then most days turned cold. Late in November, snow drifted down and covered the ground six inches deep. Cows bunched up by the barn and bellowed. The snow made it hard for them to get at grass, and they wanted hay. I walked down to the phone house and called John.

Rob drove the big green tractor up the river road, loaded hay onto the wagon, and we fed cattle. John showed up when we finished and took Rob back down to Unity.

The next day, Laura, Juniper, Amanda, and I ate breakfast before daylight. Laura said, "I don't think we'll attempt any school this early in the morning."

Juniper said, "No. We don't have time for classes. We have to go feed cattle."

Amanda said, "We're still learning, about cows and feeding and hay and snow, and then we read books, but it won't work to try to have classes again until they take the cattle down to Unity." She cleared dishes from the table and put them on the drainboard by the pump, wiped the table, and moved some of her papers to the table, planning to squeeze some drawing between breakfast and feeding cattle.

Laura said, "You might not have time to draw. You have to get all your warm clothing on."

"If I don't have time, I'll just get everything ready for when we finish."

Laura dipped hot water from the big canner on the cookstove and poured it into the dishpan in the sink under the red, hand-operated pump.

I walked out the front door into the cold morning, where first light painted the eastern sky luminous grey. I walked

through new snow to the barn, drove the tractor out of the barn, hooked it to the wagon, drove across the highway, and loaded hay. I stopped on the road by the house. Amanda and Juniper ran out. I climbed up on the trailer and gave Juniper and Amanda a hand up onto the trailer with the hay and me.

Laura climbed the metal steps up into the high cab and drove the tractor and wagon out onto the meadow and back and forth across the meadow. Juniper and Amanda and I threw hay off the wagon. Cows crowded the wagon and bellowed for hay. Hay we threw off hit the ground, and as there was room for them, more and more of the cows stopped crowding the wagon and stood with their heads down and ate the hay on the ground. Cold sun rose above the ridges. We had 225 pairs (a cow and a calf makes a pair) on the meadow and twelve bulls. When we finished feeding the main herd, we loaded more hay and fed 90 steers down on the sawmill field.

We finished feeding about eleven o'clock, built the fire up from coals in the stove and finished the clean up in the kitchen that feeding interrupted. We ate lunch.

Juniper worked on a poster-sized drawing with colored pencils, an illustration for an adventure novel she was writing, and Amanda continued her project of building a magazine. I said, "I'm going to take the small tractor and the wagon and go burn some slash and cut some firewood. I'd like to put five or six more cords in the barn before the snow gets too deep to bring wood across the meadow."

Laura took flour and salt from the cupboard. She asked, "Are we still going to make play dough?"

Juniper said, "Sure. Let's make play dough."

They planned to make play dough, sculpt creations from the play dough, harden them in the oven, and then get the

house in order.

Feeding cattle disrupted our schedules, and our existence got a little chaotic, but the feeding only went on for about two weeks before John and Mike and crew members took the cattle down to the home ranch. The alternative, which we had tried, was for me to wait until someone came up from Unity to help me feed. With chores down there and the time it took to come up the river, whoever was coming up didn't get to Whitney until ten or eleven or twelve, and just the waiting and the feeding used up my day.

I liked feeding cattle for a while, the way we did it. I liked every job I did on the ranch, shoveling ditches, irrigating, cutting hay, fixing fences. When I got tired of one job, I started something else and returned to the first job when I wasn't tired of it anymore. The crew down at the home ranch worked the same jobs, over and over, sometimes ten or twelve hours a day. I never wanted to trade jobs with any of them. None of them wanted to live at Whitney without electricity or running water, with no winter work and no winter pay, so it looked like everyone was in the right place and the right job.

I hooked the wagon to the small, red tractor, crossed the river and the meadow, dropped dead trees into snow, cut limbs off the fallen trees, and piled the limbs and tops.

Sun set behind distant mountains and took the small warmth of the day with it. I set several slash piles on fire, loaded wood onto the wagon and piled more slash while the fires burned. Elk whistled in the timber on the ridge above me. Low mist spread along the edge of the timber and wrapped in close to the fires as the last of the day's light faded to winter night. Out of the mist, across the fire from me, a hereford bull stepped into the firelight. Where nothing

had been when I bent down to pick up a branch, when I stood up, I faced the massive head and forequarters of a bull.

Without meaning to, I yelled, “Hey,” and threw the branch into the air. The bull just stood there and looked at me. “Make a noise or something when you walk out of the fog. Bout jumped out of my boots. What are you doing way down here when all the other cattle are up by the barn, hanging around the feed ground?”

I kept a fire between him and me as I loaded wood. As John, who’s been working with herefords for more than sixty years said, “Yes, herefords are usually gentle. All the same, don’t forget, a bull is a bull.” The bull got bored with my company and disappeared into the fog.

The moon rose above the mountain, giant, yellow-red, then whiter as it left the horizon haze. I threw burned-off branch ends into the fires with a pitchfork, loaded my tools onto the wagon, and drove the tractor up the meadow. I didn’t have lights on the tractor, but I didn’t need them. Moonlight shone brightly on the snow-covered meadow. Mist stayed behind me and conspired coldly with trees at the edge of the meadow.

About thirty elk trotted from low ground by the river across the meadow, toward the timber. I didn’t see the hereford bull. He might be in dark shadows in the timber, or maybe he decided to join the rest of the cattle on the feed ground.

A barred owl stood on the sandbank just above the river ford. We’d met several times before. “How’s the hunting, owl?” We looked at each other for a moment. Then the owl flew up the river and out of sight. I crossed the river. Running water looked black in the shadows of willows.

My hands and feet felt cold despite double mittens, wool

socks, and insulated boots. I left the tractor and wagon, still loaded with wood, in the barn. I trotted to the house, shed my boots and insulated coveralls, and warmed up by the stove.

I told Amanda, Juniper, and Laura about the bull, the elk, and the owl. They laughed at my replay of throwing the limb toward the cold sky and yelling “Hey” at an unimpressed bull. They prepared to settle into their beds for the night. We blew the lamps out. Bright moonlight flooded in the south windows and lit up the house. Smoke rising from the chimney toward the sky cast a dancing shadow on the snow.

A great horned owl called from out on the meadow, and another answered from somewhere over by the barn. Everyone but me, listening to owls in the quiet night, then coyotes singing from across the meadow, peaceful in the soft light, climbed into bed and drifted toward dreams.

I lit lamps at my work table and wrote by the soft, yellow light. I checked the thermometer once in a while. It dropped to ten below zero by eleven o’clock. I dressed warmly, blew out the lamps, walked in bright moonlight to the barn, started the big tractor, pulled it out of the barn into the corral, and let it warm up for about twenty minutes while I read by the light in the cab.

Since we have no electricity, we can’t plug in the block heater. If a diesel engine gets too cold, it won’t start, so I put cardboard around the engine and the radiator to help hold the heat. Then I start the motor and warm it up once or several times during the night, depending on how cold it gets.

John and Mike brought up a portable power plant our first winter at Whitney, so I could plug the block heater into it a couple of hours before I wanted to start the tractor and skip getting up in the middle of the night. It got so cold, the power plant refused to start. We used most of the day, plenty of

starting fluid, and three pickups with jumper cables to start the tractor, so I renewed my policy of running the engine enough to keep it from cooling all the way down.

This problem with starting a cold diesel engine is one reason we don't feed cattle all winter up here. John and Mike say it takes about twice as much feed to get the cattle through the colder winter up here. The colder it is, the more hay they eat just to keep warm enough to stay alive.

I slept from midnight until four o'clock in the morning. I got up and walked through twenty-two-below-zero moonlight and warmed up the tractor again. I slept for two hours and got up to feed cattle. I drove the tractor out of the barn, hooked up the wagon, pulled out of the corral, and the engine died. Oh my. I climbed down and walked to the house. I said, "Ice in the fuel lines I think. The tractor won't run. I'm going to take the fuel line and the filters off. I don't have any idea how long it'll be before the tractor runs again, so just do whatever you want to do until I get it going."

I wasn't a sentence into what I had to say before Amanda stripped off her boots and snow pants, and Juniper moved her drawing from the bean bag to the table. Laura said, "Well, I guess we could have classes."

Amanda said, "It works better if we plan ahead for classes, and we didn't plan for classes this morning. I want to work on my magazine. If I don't work on my magazine, my time to work on it is gone for today, because we have to go feed whenever the tractor starts."

Juniper said, "I want to work on this illustration, and I want to write on my novel. If it gets interrupted too long, I might forget what I have in mind for the next part. I think we should just wait until we're through feeding for this year before we start classes again."

Laura said, “Okay, but once we’re through feeding, we really have to hit classes hard and catch up all this time off.”

Amanda said, “Sure. We will. But it isn’t really time off. We learn all the time, you know.” She pulled a chair up to the table, arranged her pages just beyond Juniper’s drawing, and gathered her tools. “We learn a lot by reading, and we learn with all our projects.”

“You sound like you’ve been listening to what your dad has to say about education.”

“I have been. He’s right, too. And don’t worry, we will get back to classes when they take the cattle out of here.”

“I know he is, about that part of it.” Laura smiled at me.

Everything was headed in smooth directions in the house, so I picked up my tool box, carried it to the corral, removed fuel lines and filters, and found ice. I trotted down to the phone house and called John and Mike’s place. Mike answered. I told him I needed new fuel filters, and he said he’d go to Baker and get them and bring them up.

I went back, heated fuel lines with a torch, and drained them. I couldn’t do anything else until I had new fuel filters, so I walked back to the house, took off all my cold weather clothing, and wrote part of an essay.

Clouds covered the valley and brought the temperature up to a few degrees above zero. Light, powdery snow fell all morning. It’s a long drive from Unity to Baker and then up the mountain to Whitney Valley, and Mike didn’t show up until midafternoon. As soon as he showed up, I grabbed warm clothes, and we headed for the corral. I dropped the big, square filters into their containers, bolted on the covers, and fastened fuel lines back into place.

I said, “I hope this thing didn’t cool down too much to start.”

Mike said, “Now Jon, you know it’s going to start right up. You climb up there and get ready, and I’ll give it a shot of ether. It’ll start right up.”

Clouds blew east, and the sun came out. A burst of black smoke climbed from the exhaust pipe toward the winter sky as the engine roared, rattled, and settled down to a steady rumble. Mike climbed back into his pickup and drove away down the river road. The thermometer indicated five degrees when I walked by it into the house. I said, “Hear that tractor running? I did that with my handy red toolbox, Mike’s delivery of parts, and God’s help. Let’s go. The cows are angry about late chow.”

Laura climbed three green, steel steps and sat up in the heated, glassed-in cab, with a radio, power steering, and a power-shift transmission. She drove the tractor through the corral and out onto the meadow.

Amanda and Juniper helped me throw hay off the wagon. I worked hard, paused, and peeled off my insulated coveralls, paused again, and peeled off my insulated vest. The eight-foot-long, four-foot-wide, and four-foot-tall bales weighed about twelve-hundred pounds each. If we started the sheaves right, they curled off the wagon under their own weight, and we worked fast and easy. But sometimes a fourth or more of a bale fell away from the rest of the bale onto the wagon, and we had to pry with a steel bar and then lift too much with a pitch fork to separate the sheaves and throw them off the wagon. Even when the sheaves peeled away from the bale and fell the way we wanted them to, we moved fast and warmed up.

Cows bellowed, crowded the wagon, and bullied each other about who got the best hay first. Snow on their backs melted and steamed in the clear air. A bull reached onto the

wagon for hay and startled me when I turned and almost stepped on his face. His head, with horns, was as wide as the wagon. “Whoo-ee, do be careful about those horns.”

Amanda said, “We will be, but I’m sure he wouldn’t hurt us.”

Juniper said, “We want to scratch his forehead and pet his nose.”

“No doubt he’s gentle, but we don’t know him well enough to be sure.”

The moon rose pale above Cottonwood Butte. The sun set. Ninety hungry steers waited for us on the sawmill field. I reloaded the wagon with big bales while everyone else ran to the house, warmed up, and drank hot chocolate. I stopped on the county road by the house, and Laura, Juniper, and Amanda came out. Half a mile down the road, Amanda said, “My hands are cold. They’re starting to hurt.”

“Your mittens aren’t heavy enough. You’d better ride up in the cab with Mama.” I got Laura to stop and I handed Amanda up the high steps. She got her footing, grabbed the rail, and climbed into the cab. I put my vest and coveralls back on.

“Are you warm enough, Juniper?”

“Yes, I’m warm enough.”

Laura drove down the road two miles to the sawmill field. I hadn’t put the tire chains on the tractor, and it sideslipped on snow on the banked curve. Laura stepped down on the differential lock and reduced the engine speed. The tractor pulled straight again. She couldn’t hear me with the engine running and all the cab windows shut, but I said, “That’s real professional driving, Laura. We’re proud of you.”

Juniper said, “She does a good job.”

“Let’s remember to tell her that when she can hear us.”

Laura turned off the road and stopped. I jumped down, trotted past the tractor, and opened the gate into the field. Laura idled the engine down and opened the window. I shouted, “Turn the lights off.” Moonlight on the snow gave us plenty of light. We die-seled down the meadow toward the mill. Juniper and I peeled flakes from the big bales and curled them off the wagon onto the snow. I had loaded dry bales from the center of the stack, so the sheaves weren’t frozen together, and they peeled off easily.

The willows along the river, the old mill building and the deteriorating buildings around it, the timber across the meadow, everything showed bright but soft in soft moonlight. If I were a painter, I’d paint that scene, moonlight and dark shadow. I’m not a painter, so I stored it in my mind under “treasured images and experiences.”

I said, “Let’s save the rest of this bale for the ride back.” Laura looked through the big back window, saw me pointing, brought the tractor and trailer around, and headed for home. Behind us, the steers spread out along the hay, heads down in the moonlight. We stopped. I jumped off the wagon and shut the gate. I climbed on the wagon again. Laura drove up the road toward home.

Juniper and I lay down on our backs on hay and pulled loose hay around us and over us for warmth. We watched the moon ride above us in the sky, keeping pace. Juniper said, “The moon looks close enough to touch.”

“Reach for it.”

“I can almost reach it.”

“I feel like I’m floating up there in the sky with the moon.”

“I do too, spinning in the sky and floating toward the moon.”

We left the tractor silent in the barn. A great horned owl called from down by the river. “Hoo-hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo.”

I looked at the thermometer as we went in. “Twenty-two below zero already.” We brushed off hay and shed outdoor clothing. I put more wood into the stoves.

Laura said, “That was beautiful, on the meadow in the moonlight. I know the cows didn’t like waiting so long, but I’m glad we did it that way once.” We all agreed with her.

Juniper sat in the back room a while, where we had lighted no lamps. Moonlight shining through the big south windows lit up the room. After a while, she joined us in the front room. We all read by kerosene lamps. Moonlight lay quiet all around the house and all across the meadow.

The next night, when I drove the tractor out of the barn to warm it up, I opened the gate and drove up the meadow in moonlight. The tractor warmed up faster than when I let it sit and idle, and I saw some of the night on the meadow.

I told Amanda and Juniper, “You’re doing a good job of helping feed the cattle. I’ve decided to pay you twenty-five cents a day for helping.” They were delighted. They were happy doing it without pay, but it gave them a chance to earn some money.

Tuesday morning, John brought the crew up with trucks, and they started hauling the cows away. Four truckloads headed down the road by 9:30. They brought three of the trucks back and started down with a second load. About a half-hour later, John drove back up the road in his pickup and said, “Scott put his truck in the ditch. Bring the big tractor down as fast as you safely can, and we’ll see if we can pull him out.”

When I tried to pull the truck out, the tractor wheels spun on snow and ice, even with chains on. Scott backed an empty

truck to the truck in the ditch and Scott, John, Rob, and I drove the cattle from the truck in the ditch to the truck on the road. Then we hooked the loaded truck to the front of the tractor.

When John said take the tractor down the road, he said hurry, so I didn't stop at the house for a coat. The sun dropped below the ridge, and I felt mighty cold. I didn't even know he was there until, from behind me, John put his heavy red sweater over my shoulders. "Thank you John."

"You're welcome."

He was a lot bigger man than I am, so the sweater was voluminous, which was just fine, because it kept me that much warmer. I always did like John, but I liked him that much better.

Tractor and truck pulling together wouldn't pull the truck out of the ditch. Rob and Scott started chaining up the truck we had hooked to the front of the tractor. Scott crawled under the truck to fasten the back of the chains. I saw the wheels start to move, and I yelled, "Get out of there. The truck's rolling." He scrambled clear as the truck rolled into the front wheels of the tractor. Rob drove the truck forward again and stood on the brakes while Scott finished chaining it up.

Both machines chained together pulled the truck out of the ditch. We unhooked everything and stowed tow chains. Everyone but me drove away down the road. I climbed up into the tractor, turned the heater on high, and drove at an easy pace toward home. Canyon walls, white with snow, with steep rock faces showing black, rose both sides of me. Below the road, the river ran in its rocky bed. Most of the surface had iced over, but dark areas of running water showed through in some places. Old growth pine, fir, and western larch trees towered above the river. Snow clung white in the

tall, green trees and in lower-growing brush between trees and covered the ground.

I reminded myself, no matter who is in what kind of hurry, never go out on a winter day without plenty of clothing. If the tractor died, and I had to walk the rest of the way home, I would be in serious trouble. I didn't stop to think we might be out until after sunset in below zero weather. I always think of these things, except for this one time. One time can be fatal in winter in this country.

The tractor ran fine all the way home. I tuned in a station of country and western music on the radio, some of which I didn't care for, but I left it on. I never watch television, and I rarely listen to the radio, so once in a while, I like to hear what people sing about, even some of what they advertise, to remind me of the shape of the rest of the world, out of our mountain valley.

I shut off the tractor and climbed down. Cows bellowed. The crew had taken the calves away from the cows, and the cows bawled for their calves for the next two days. I didn't get much sleep, with all the noise. I felt tired and grouchy, but we live in such a quiet place, we could put up with a noisy time now and then. I could be tired and grouchy for a couple of days.

Friday, we loaded the last of the cattle. Rob and John hauled them away, and Scott drove the big green tractor down the road, headed for John's home ranch. Quiet settled into the valley. Ravens called sometimes, a hoarse, croaking sound. Vehicles passed on the highway, but we only heard the big trucks.

I cut four more cords of wood over the next week and brought the wood across the meadow on the wagon behind the little tractor. It snowed some every day, until I had trouble

getting the tractor and wagon through drifts wind piled on the meadow, so I quit cutting firewood. The wood I had stacked in the front yard and in the barn satisfied me. We had plenty to get us through the winter. I could sell a few cords on our trips to Sumpter or Baker.

I love winter in the valley. It brings living down to basic levels. I don't think I would like living in a modern house, where the house, with all its machines, takes care of survival. Here, we participate with our shelter to make it through the deep winters. Our survival depends on our careful plans, on putting up enough wood, splitting the wood, feeding the stoves, refilling kerosene lamps and trimming the wicks, on keeping our transportation in shape and having a way to warm the engine so it will start if we need it on the coldest days. I like being responsible for every step in our survival and doing a good job of fulfilling that responsibility.

Sprouting New Words

The year of Juniper's sixth birthday, early in the fall, I drove down to Unity for my monthly gasoline and pay. John wrote out my check at the kitchen table. Then John, Mike, and I moved into the living room and drank coffee. John said, "Well, Rob ran off to get married and left us short handed. We'd let you drive the white pickup or the brown one back and forth if you'd come down every day and haul breadloaf stacks off the field until he gets back."

"Sure. Which pickup has the best radio?"

Mike said, "The brown one. The white pickup, you get to bouncing on that rough road along the river, the radio pops and rattles."

"Then I'll use the brown one."

John said, "Down in the canyon, you might not get much reception."

"That's okay. As long as the radio makes an honest effort."

Juniper wanted to go to school. I took her with me down the river road, walked into the school building with her to make sure we had arranged everything right, then left her there and drove to work.

I backed the tractor and trailer to a breadloaf-shaped stack of hay, tipped the trailer up with hydraulic power, and started the chains that drew the trailer and tractor slowly backward, under the stack. I tipped the stack down level and drove off the field to the stackyard, trying to make enough speed to get the job done, but not so much that the top of the stack slid off. Seven antelope ran across the field in front of me, slipped under the fence, and ran into the sparse sage. I hauled more

breadloaf stacks, lost the tops of some, saw some of the day around me, and quit work early enough to pick Juniper up when school ended for the day.

Laura and I always told Juniper and Amanda where we were going any time we would be out of their sight, even briefly. They weren't afraid of being alone, because they knew where we were and when we would be back. At school, Juniper expected her teacher to be her guide to unfamiliar territory and unfamiliar ways of doing things. Her teacher took Juniper to the library. When Juniper looked up from her book, Miss Sue had gone, and she had said nothing about where she was going or if or when she would be back. When I stopped at the school to get Juniper, Miss Sue told me what happened in the library, and she expressed amazement that a six year old girl would cry at finding herself alone in the library.

I felt amazed that Miss Sue didn't see what unfamiliar, scary territory this could be to a six year old who had never been away from her family, who was always near adults who loved her and carefully guided her. I didn't express my amazement, but I did point out, as I had when I left her earlier that day, that Juniper came from a very different background from most of the children Miss Sue knew, and she might need careful guidance until the school and the people there became familiar.

Miss Sue seemed to accept as normal that a boy who sat beside Juniper in class would threaten to "punch her lights out" over a disagreement about the order of letters in the alphabet.

On the way home, Juniper told me about her day. I reassured her all I could. She thought she would become more comfortable at school as she became more familiar with

it, and she decided to continue with public school in an attempt to understand better what it was, but after her third day in school, Juniper didn't want to go back. School was not what she expected, academically or socially.

We could have driven Juniper nine miles down the river road and put her on a school bus. The rambling rural bus ride, on icy roads in winter, and school, and the bus ride home would have added up to more than a twelve-hour day for her.

I had been interested in teaching Juniper and Amanda at home ourselves. Circumstances conspired to turn that interest to determination.

Her teacher liked Juniper. She said she would be glad to keep her at her home through the week so she could go to school. Laura and I considered that a kind offer, but neither of us had any interest in having Juniper become our week-ends-only daughter. Juniper liked Miss Sue, but she didn't want to leave home to go to a school that had turned out to be much less than she had expected. Laura and I knew we could say, "That's the way the world works, kiddo. You might as well get used to it early." We didn't think childhood should shape in that direction for our daughters.

We thanked Miss Sue and notified the administrators of the school that Juniper had finished with public schooling for the year. The superintendent threatened us by letter with district attorneys, sheriffs, and arrest warrants. I referred him to a state law that said anyone over thirteen miles from the nearest school was not subject to the mandatory school attendance law. Then he volunteered to help with materials, curriculum, and testing, but he didn't come through with help when Laura asked. I was grateful he didn't. I thought figuring out our own program according to our own needs and desires would be the most effective approach.

We have read to our daughters a lot since they were babies. When Amanda and Juniper were small, they both fit into the rocking chair with Laura or with me. Laura bought the old blue platform rocker from the Salvation Army store for seven dollars. Amanda or Juniper first pointed out its noisy springs said, “Comfort, comfort” as we rocked, and we all agreed. In our old, dilapidated, comfortable, much-loved house in Whitney Valley, we moved the rocking chair close to the heater in winter or close to the open window in summer for bed-time reading sessions.

Laura has always been an early to bed and early to rise person. Often, when she read to our daughters in the evening, she drifted off to sleep. Sometimes, as she began to drift, the story she was reading mixed with her beginning dream, and what she said became uproariously funny for Juniper and Amanda. They erupted in laughter and talked to each other about what she had said, but when they finished their discussion of what she had said, they insisted, “Read. Read.”

Sometimes Laura woke up and finished reading. Sometimes she couldn’t muster the energy to fully wake, and I helped her to bed. Then I snuggled down between two warm, eager listeners and continued reading from where she had drifted into dreams.

When we read *Wind in the Willows*, every time we walked down by the river or out on the meadow, Juniper and Amanda looked for Moley and Ratty. I didn’t actively join the search, but I hoped they would find the two characters from the book, and I wouldn’t have been surprised if they did. Juniper and Amanda felt like Moley in the spring: “Hang spring cleaning.” Adventure is outdoors. Seek it.

They often became the characters we read about. When we first moved to Whitney, Juniper answered only to “Pooh

Bear.” She was Pooh Bear, and no one gained anything by questioning that, though some tried. Laura and I liked living with Pooh Bear for a while. He is an interesting, warm, and loving bear, and Juniper had a good grasp on what qualities comprised the character she became.

When she was two, Amanda understood the drama involved in assuming a character, and she accepted Pooh Bear’s existence among us. Together, Juniper and Amanda began to lay the groundwork for years of acting out adventures they read about, wrote themselves, or made up as they acted them out.

Early in their lives, they began to meet the vast worlds available in shelves full of books, in libraries full of books, in stores full of books. They wanted to enter those worlds on their own, by their own reading, beyond what Laura and I could read to them. Juniper began to learn to read before her three-day adventure with public schooling. When it became clear we were on our own for education, she and Laura worked on reading every day at the kitchen table. By Christmas, Juniper read anything she wanted to read and greatly enjoyed her reading.

While Juniper plunged deeply into C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Amanda read simpler books aloud. Laura thought she had memorized the books. I said, “No. She’s reading.”

Laura selected random words from a book Amanda hadn’t read. Amanda read the words aloud. She said, “I can read. I listened when Mama was teaching Juniper. But I want to read big books, but they’re too hard for me.” She burst into tears.

I said, “If you want to improve your reading vocabulary, so you can read more complex books, I’ll help you.” She did want to. Intensely. Amanda and I worked together for a while

most days. We worked on building her reading vocabulary, and Laura and I started teaching her to write.

Spring came to Whitney Valley, and the snow melted. I had to irrigate meadows, repair fences, and plant our garden. Winters are long in Whitney Valley. The season to work is short. I stayed busy from daylight until dark most days. But Amanda and I continued her reading lessons while I worked in the garden. I spaded ground. She sat by me and read. Earthworms crawled out of clods of dirt I turned up as I worked the ground and made new ways down into the moist soil.

Amanda spelled aloud, “C-o-u-g-h.”

I said, “Cough. That would be a hard one to sound out, because it’s spelled oddly.”

“It should be spelled k-o-f.”

I raked seedbeds and planted seeds. Amanda moved closer to me and sat down in the grass on the ditch bank.

“W-e-l-l-i-n-g.”

“Can you sound it out?”

She studied it. “Well-ling. Welling.”

I asked her to sound out only a few words, to be sure she progressed in her ability. Often, I irrigated the meadow or fixed a fence up in the timber. Then she sounded out words or asked for help from Juniper or Laura.

Those times together in the garden were for learning in a hurry, and Amanda was in a hurry. I didn’t object to her being in a hurry. When she spelled out a word and then heard it and said it herself, she had it. She didn’t have to ask for it again.

Radishes and peas and lettuce sprouted and grew. Peas blossomed. I brought water down the ditch, into the garden. Amanda followed me, reading her book and spelling aloud

the words she needed. I weeded the newly sprouted carrots while the water spread through the peas. Amanda sat on a rock beside me and read. “R-e-c-o-g-n-i-z-e-d.”

“Recognized.”

We ate a lot of edible-pod peas before a severe frost took the peas and the potatoes in late July. We ate carrots, kale, onions, and garlic clear into winter. By that winter, Amanda could read almost anything she wanted to read. Juniper wrote and illustrated books, bound them herself, and still read voraciously. Amanda started keeping a diary, with pictures and short sentences.

Late in December, I shoveled down through two feet of snow, moved the hay aside and harvested carrots, kale and onions. I covered the garden again, carried my harvest into the house and washed the vegetables. “Who wants carrots, or kale, or onions?”

Laura, Juniper, Amanda, and I sat close to the stove. We ate vegetables and read books.

Amanda spelled, “S-i-m-u-l-t-a-n-e-o-u-s-l-y.”

I said, “Simultaneously. Do you know what it means?”

“No.”

“At the same time.” I thought about it. “That’s the first time you’ve needed help with a word for a long time.”

“I know.” She smiled at me. She took another bite of carrot and chewed and read. So did I. Those carrots were incomparably sweet, crisp, and tender.

We had no television. We scattered out or gathered together. Juniper worked on a drawing, twenty-nine by thirty-eight inches. She drew at the kitchen table. When she wasn’t drawing, her drawing in progress waited on the large beanbag cushion on the kitchen floor, or on one of the beds. The cushion on the kitchen floor was for jumping over or onto,

for resting, and for a place to put large drawings.

When I wasn't writing, anyone could use my writing table in the back room. My writing board placed over my manuscripts kept our materials divided. My typewriter became our typewriter when Amanda and Juniper learned to use it. In the beginning, Juniper worked with the typewriter on the floor. I loved to watch her type. She hunkered in front of the typewriter, hit the letters with her fast-flying forefinger, and the space bar with the big toe of her right foot.

Amanda started her typing at the table, and Juniper eventually moved from the floor to tables and desks.

Periodically, someone outside the family commented on my daughters' typing technique, often with concern. "Why don't they type with more fingers?" Nudged by the culture's concern for the economic potential of nearly everything, I renewed an old discussion. "I can teach you how to type with all your fingers."

Juniper asked, "Why?"

"It's a faster, more efficient way to type."

"I'm going fast enough now."

Amanda asked, "What's the big rush?"

Juniper said, "I'm efficient. I don't make very many mistakes. I type as fast as I think of what I want to write."

Laura joined in. "If you ever want to make a living typing, you'll need to know how to type with all fingers."

Juniper said, "I won't want to make a living typing."

Amanda said, "We're too young to worry about making a living yet."

I never argue with irrefutable logic. They continued typing with two fingers each, and I left them alone about it. It wasn't hunt and peck, because they didn't hunt. They knew where all the letters were, and they achieved impressive speed and

clean manuscripts.

Bob O'Link, Rabbit-Eared Girlie, and Education

Amanda, Juniper, and Laura worked at school together at the kitchen table in the mornings. When Juniper and Amanda finished with classes, they drew, painted, wrote, read, sculpted, took care of their daily chores, explored the country around, played with their toys, and made more toys.

Mix a cup of flour with half a cup of salt, and add water. Mold the resulting dough, and bake it in the oven, and you will have a permanent form. I have a snake, several cats, and a groundhart my daughters made and painted for me. They made many toys of this material.

Juniper picked up a small, oval-shaped rock, glued clover blossoms all over it for fur, added a seeding-up head of timothy for a tail and paper cutouts for ears and eyes. She had a very cat-like toy cat. Rocks or pieces of wood sometimes look like people or animals. Paint, crayons, charcoal, or a knife can add detail and emphasize the similarity.

Some of their most active toys are plastic, factory-made toys. Meet Bob O'Link, a two inch tall, red cowboy. Along with several other small, broken toys, he cost a penny at the Salvation Army store. You can't shake his hand, because he doesn't have any, nor any right arm at all, nor any legs below the knees. That doesn't keep him from being an active, obstreperous, obstinate, horse-owning, horse-training, marrying cowboy, who will tell you he is in charge of the stables, even though he isn't. Silver, his horse, is.

None of us approve of the fact that Bob has seven wives, but our approval or disapproval doesn't influence him at all. The stables house many horses and several other people, including Lank, Bob's brother, Maize Cowboy, and all Bob's

wives, to whom Bob is kind, though his obtrusive personality often entangles him in troubles with them and everyone else.

Marilyn, a plastic woman about Bob's size, became concerned about all the parentless baby toys and started an orphanage. The orphanage and the stables are interacting communities. Both communities face chronic shortages of money. Marilyn charges a five dollar adoption fee, and that helps. Rabbit-Eared Girlie opened a store, and she will sell anything that is not essential to the community. Though they don't like to do it, sometimes they have to sell horses to keep the operating money coming in.

Some adults disapprove of our daughters' wide and sometimes wild range of imagination, as if imagination, in some way, is dangerous. I ignore the criticism. Imagination is a powerful positive force, essential to education and essential to the world.

Amanda owns over a hundred dolls, some three dimensional, and some two. She brought me a magazine and showed me a full-page, full-color picture of a well-dressed, glamorous doll, advertised as a "collector's item." She said, "This is the most expensive one yet, almost three hundred dollars."

"My goodness. Three-hundred dollars for a doll is almost unimaginable to me."

"I know. May I have this one?"

I looked at the back of the page, which had more advertisements on it. I said, "Sure. Go ahead."

She skipped into the kitchen, but she came back soon. She said, "I'm out of cardboard. Do you have anything I can use?" I gave her cardboard from typing paper boxes. Then I followed her into the kitchen and watched.

She cut the page from the magazine and glued it onto the

cardboard. She said, “I used to cut them out and then glue them, but that was much harder to do. Now I glue and then cut. That’s a lot easier.” She smoothed the picture onto the cardboard and set it aside to let the glue dry before cutting it out.

Juniper never has been interested in dolls, but she uses pictures of animals and of people for cutout toys. She draws many of the pictures she uses for cutouts.

This evening, Juniper draws. Amanda builds a magazine on the other end of the kitchen table. The drawing moves, but all the magazine materials would be hard to move without upsetting the careful order of Amanda’s work. We eat around, in spots we open up on the table, or from plates on our laps. To some, our house seems disorderly. We experimented, hoping to achieve a more orderly existence. We picked up and put away all projects at the end of each day. It didn’t work, so it didn’t last. Gathering all the materials and putting them away interrupts the orderly continuity of a project. We decided our definitions of orderly and disorderly were wrong. If a work area progresses toward order, not in the appearance of the area, but in that the work in the area will achieve a desired goal, then that work area is orderly. Any appearance of disorder is in the perspective of the viewer.

Our definition of “education” evolves. School is the structured part of the girls’ education, which takes place at the kitchen table according to a schedule. School is the study of standard subjects, such as history, geography, science, and mathematics, in an attempt to have that part of our daughters’ education roughly parallel to that of children enrolled in public schools. Education is all of learning and growing, and a lot of that happens outside of school. I would have skipped

the school part of it almost entirely, had the decision been for me to make alone, but that wasn't the way it went, and now, several years after the beginning, I have no regrets about the way it did go.

Structured schooling consumes a small part of each day. It has taken as much as two hours of the day, rarely. That many hours of school leads to rebellion among the students.

Some who hear of our approach to our daughters' education are concerned. Aren't our children missing opportunities children in public schools have? I'm sure they are. Amanda would like to have singing lessons and dance lessons. Juniper wants to participate in sports. They both want to learn at least one language in addition to English. Our daughters also have many opportunities most other children miss.

Early in the spring, when sun shone warmly into the valley, Amanda and Juniper and I drove to the sawmill field and parked the pickup on the shoulder of the road, two hundred and fifty yards east of the long-abandoned mill.

I said, "See the cranes down on the field? to the right of the mill? They're grey, and those grey logs are directly behind them, so they're hard to see, but they're there."

They studied the mill field until they found the cranes against the ancient stack of grey logs. Juniper asked, "Are they sandhill cranes?"

"Yes."

Amanda said, "Then those are the same ones that fly right over the house sometimes."

"Yes, they are."

"How close can we get to them?"

"We'll find out, because I have to work on a ditch near where they are."

We crawled under the fence and walked through sagebrush to the place where Dry Creek flows into several ditches. I left the plastic dam there, and we started down the ditch toward the old spring house, walking slowly. Behind me, Juniper said, “They’re already getting nervous about us.” We stood still, then took a few slow steps, then stood still again, but approaching cautiously didn’t help much. When we were more than a hundred yards from the cranes, they began calling and walking away. We stopped and stood still, but they ran and jumped to get into the air and flew across the river, away from us.

Amanda asked, “Do you ever get closer to them?”

“I’ve been closer in casual encounters but never by trying to get closer. They’re very wary birds.”

“Are they rare?”

“Not as rare as whooping cranes or trumpeter swans. But we usually only have one pair in this valley.”

Last time we walked to the mill pond, we were overconfident. We didn’t realize a dozen whistling swans floated on the pond, concealed from us by the high bank, until they took to wing. We were so close to them, we heard their wings creak through the air.

This time, we cross the field above the pond, headed for a place where we can see more of the pond from farther away, but six Canada geese honk and take off. I say, “I guess I’m still overconfident. I’m used to them being more used to me.”

Amanda says, “They’re probably nervous about us. We aren’t usually with you.”

We walk down the field, south of the pond. Then we turn and walk toward it. I say, “There still are geese on the pond. They’re behind the bank closest to us. They’re dark heads against a dark background, so they’re hard to see, but you can

see the chin straps. Look for the moving white spot just above the bank.” That pair takes to wing and flies past close in front of us, up the field, and glides back to the ground. Juniper walks away, toward the mill, and explores the banks of the mill pond.

I open the ditch with my shovel to get water onto the field south of the pond. Amanda finds a tightly-curved orange caterpillar floating on the water. We try to decide if it is dead or just dormant because it’s so cold, but we don’t reach a conclusion. Amanda puts the caterpillar carefully into a willow bush. She says, “If it’s alive, it will be all right after it dries out and warms up. That way, it won’t drown.” Then she helps me clean dead grass from the ditch. Juniper walks along the built-up bank of the pond, exploring new territory.

When the water runs right, we walk back up the ditch. Juniper rejoins us. Amanda asks, “Are the cranes shyer than the geese?”

“Yes. You were much closer to those two geese yesterday than we were to the cranes today, weren’t you, Juniper? Do you see those two geese ahead of us? Look. See that tallest willow bush at the edge of the field? They’re right in front of that, but closer to us.”

“Oh. One of them just raised its head. Now I see them. There must be something wrong with my eyes. I didn’t see them until one of them moved.”

“Do you still see them, now that it put its head back down?”

“Yes.”

“There’s nothing wrong with your eyes. When they’re down flat like that, they blend with their background. They don’t want you to see them. Look away from them and then find them again. The more you see animals hiding from you

in appearances, the easier it is to do.”

I set the plastic dam into the ditch. Amanda and Juniper bring me rocks and I weight it down. We watch for a while. Water flows over the ditch bank, runs through spring grasses, and begins to soak down into roots. “That’s just about right.” We walk back to the pickup and drive home.

Juniper and Amanda wash dishes while I cook supper. Laura worked her way through a particularly busy morning this morning, getting ready for company coming for the week-end and getting ready to go to a lecture at the Baker church this evening. Amanda and Juniper didn’t have their usual morning classes in history, geography, math, and science. But they had a class in wildlife observation and identification this afternoon, in analytic vision, in deportment in other species’ territory. Our class continues this evening.

We talk about scientific names of species. We talk about cranes’ nests. I know where the cranes nest, but we agree we won’t go there, because the book says they might abandon their nest if they’re disturbed on the nesting ground. Juniper says, “If anyone asks us where their nest is, we can just say, ‘Somewhere in this valley.’”

We talk about how some birds let us get quite close to them and others don’t. I say, “You saw how the cranes ran and kicked away from the ground as they were taking wing. It takes some time and some distance for them to get airborne and then to get higher than a predator can jump, because they’re such big birds. I think they’re very aware of that, and that’s why they start to fly when we’re still a long way from them.”

Juniper and Amanda take care of our home library. They arrange the books in the bookcases and keep track of what we have. They make a list of what we need, and we shop the

library on our trips to town. We exchange boxes of books at the library every time we go to town. The librarians know us and the voracious reading appetites of these girls who are curious about everything in the world, from what poisons a murderer in Sherlock Holmes's world might use, to stage devices used in William Shakespeare's plays, to mythology of cultures around the world.

The librarians know we drive forty-five miles to town as seldom as we can, and they suspend all rules limiting how many books we can check out. If we can carry the books out to our pickup, we can take them home. The lady who runs the bookmobile saves discarded magazines for us, and we make connections with her in Sumpter when we can.

This evening, Juniper and Amanda search through books and find what information they can on the questions we're trying to answer about some of the wildlife around us. They share the information with me, reading aloud to me or summing up what they find in various books.

Ingrid came out from Sumpter parts of some days, the winter after Juniper launched into reading and writing books. She tutored Juniper in spelling, grammar, and structure of the language. Ingrid needed to fulfill a requirement for a college class, and Juniper found the lessons interesting and helpful. She liked Ingrid quite well, and the time together was good for both of them.

Learning to read was not difficult for Juniper and Amanda. It didn't take years of slow, patient, repetitive work that used a major part of their time. I wanted the rest of Juniper's and Amanda's education to come to them as easily. What they encountered around them would spark their interest. Motivated by their own interests, they would study what they wanted to learn.

Laura thought we should attempt to duplicate what the schools did rather than risk doing too little and leaving gaps in their education.

I thought we would be more effective if we did too little and left gaps in their education rather than attempting to duplicate what the schools did, because it seemed to me the schools turned out mass-produced, job-oriented education to fit the needs of the industrial society. I thought we would be most effective if we encouraged creative imagination, analytic ability, and a broad understanding of everything around and let concern for earning a living come later. Specific educational needs for employment build well on a broad foundation of knowledge and on ability and practice at learning.

Learning to read and having a constant supply of good reading material was the first step in their education. Learning how to use a library was the second step, so they could find what they needed. The third step, it seemed to me, would be to avoid interfering in their education, to be available to help when Amanda or Juniper asked for help, and to supply needed materials, but beyond that, to stay out of their way.

We compromised. Part of Laura's desire to use some of the standard curriculum came from fear that our children would be tested by the schools some time. If the tests showed deficiency in their knowledge, the state might have the power to dictate how we dealt with our children and their education. We read news stories about the state taking children from people in Idaho because the parents refused to put their children in public schools, so I couldn't argue too far for my wish to have them free of structured education. Though the law protected us where we were, we might move. Legislators

could change the law.

Laura used notebooks, exercises, color inside the lines, all those things that come out of the schools, for as long as they were helpful or for as long as they worked as entertainment. If the materials got too repetitive, or didn't challenge them, Amanda and Juniper wouldn't do them, and we used them to start fires.

Juniper and Amanda are, in some ways, outsiders in this culture. After their visits to schools and sometimes after playing with children outside of school, they said the children they had met seemed to lack imagination. "They play t.v. They don't make up their own games and plays. They just play what they see on t.v., and we don't know anything about that."

Maybe they never will know much about what comes from television. During one winter's visit to a heavily televised home, I returned from errands, looked for our daughters through the house, and eventually found them in the back bedroom closet (it has a light), reading.

They had sampled television. They weren't interested in Sesame Street, the muppets, animated cartoons, or the Festival of Roses parade. Even wildlife programs, they said, were not worth their attention if there were commercials, because the commercials were unsettling, insulting, or at least irrelevant. Also, they said, people narrated or played music during the programs when they should have played the sounds of the animals or let the film run in silence. They explained that the adults in charge of the house wanted the t.v. always on; Amanda and Juniper had received permission to use the closet, which, after exploration, they knew to be the most televisionless spot in the house and comfortable for reading. If I was leaving, would I please shut the bedroom

door and the hall door as I went? I shut the hall door, then the bedroom door. I sat on the bed and read. I could see there wasn't room for me in the closet, so I didn't ask.

We got some idea of how it looked from the other side one June when two young men celebrated their graduation from high school at their grandfather's cabin near our house in Whitney Valley. They came to visit us several times, and their question each time was, how do you exist up here with no t.v.? They had trouble finding enough to do.

Laura said, "Walk. You can walk on the county road or out across the meadow. I walk out there a lot. Every time I walk across the meadow, I see wildflowers I've never seen before. So many wildflowers bloom in this valley, you can't believe it unless you begin to see them yourself. You could get a book and start learning their names. Look at the wild animals. You could write. Write a letter or a story. Write an essay or a poem."

Amanda said, "Draw. Paint. You don't have to be good at it to have fun doing it. You always discover something new if you draw or paint. Pieces of driftwood look like animals sometimes. We carved a piece of driftwood from the river just a little bit, and it really looked like a horse."

Juniper said, "You could walk down to the river and go swimming. One day, I sat on a sandbank by the river, and a mink came up from the water and walked across the sand and looked at me up close. I sat very still. It went back to the river and disappeared underwater. Then it came out again and walked across the sand and looked at me again. It did that four times. I got to see an animal I've never seen before and be really close to it. We've seen herons and cranes, different kinds of ducks, geese and snakes and fish at the river."

Amanda said, "Is there a difference between a fiddle and a

violin? We were wondering about that yesterday. We haven't found out the answer yet. You could find out the answer. You could learn to play a musical instrument. You could sing. You could sing together. That's fun."

Juniper said, "We go outside at night and watch the stars and the moon. At night, we listen to the coyotes singing. Elk whistle. Lots of times, just before it gets dark, elk come down onto the meadow, and they run and jump and play and whistle like crazy. Daddy usually calls them wapiti. Wapiti is the Indian name. You could watch them and listen to them. They're intelligent. They have a lot of fun, and it's fun to watch them. They have concerts in Baker sometimes. You could drive down to Baker and go to a concert."

I said, "Use real life all around you and your own imagination to build the visions that power you through your life. Accept no substitutes. Television has no power you can take into your lives to guide you through living."

The two young men found what we said interesting, like a view of an alien culture. Amanda and Juniper said more about what people can do in the world without television than Laura or I said, and I think that amazed the two young men, that Juniper, ten then and boyish looking, stocky, square-shouldered, brown-haired, and Amanda, eight, slim, feminine, with long golden red hair, could be so articulate, outspoken, and educated about what the world offers us. More than once, the graduates said they didn't quite believe what they were seeing or understand what they were hearing about a world without television. What they could see, hear, and experience in the flesh meant little to them compared to what they could receive from television. They went home earlier than they had planned, to see some of their favorite programs.

I'm pleased with the way having most of Amanda's and Juniper's education in the family has worked out. They read a lot. They have excellent comprehension and memory of what they read. Their reading leads them far and wide. Juniper read Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. She recruited Amanda and Laura, and the three of them acted out the play. The three of them, or sometimes, all of us, read together and acted out other plays. Juniper found biographies of Julius Caesar, Nero, and other Romans. Reading Julius Caesar led Amanda and Juniper into reading about Roman and Greek mythology. They read about myths and legends from all over the world.

There have been some subjects I attempted to steer conversations away from when our daughters listened. War, and nuclear war in particular headed that list. My attempt was not to keep the information from them entirely, but to avoid putting the whole story in their laps at once. They came into their awareness more gradually, primarily through their reading.

Juniper read about nuclear power, nuclear weapons, and radiation. She talked about what she was learning, and Amanda asked her to edit most of what she said on the subject, because hearing about it led Amanda into more nightmares than she wanted to try to handle yet.

Books with sexual description don't concern me as much. Amanda and Juniper have stopped part way through some books, "That shouldn't be in the children's section. It has too much romance and sex. I'm not ready for that yet."

They have well-developed critical ability. They go through magazines and revise advertising to make it more truthful. Their corrections of cigarette advertisements are particularly acute and amusing.

Our foremost goal through all our attempts at education

has been to allow them their childhood, to guide their education somewhat, to try to furnish what they need to fulfill their interests, and to nurture and support them.

Encouragement has been a powerful force in their education. If we can't always say, "That piece of work is beautiful," we can say, "You're doing really well. You show progress, and you can achieve what you want to achieve if you continue pursuing it diligently."

We all support each other in the pursuit of what each hopes to achieve.

When I think of enriching children's environment, I don't think of presenting them with colors, gadgets, and mechanical routines of learning. I think of enriching their environment with love, with the parents supporting, teaching, being there to fulfill the children's needs, and to help assure that interest brings results rather than atrophy from lack of fulfillment.

Everything we teach our daughters and everything we learn is undergirded with an understanding that the universe does make sense. Clear moral imperatives guide us to the highest quality of existence, to living in a way that will leave a habitable environment on the earth for our children and grandchildren.

We have no moral relativism in our school. This almost entirely modern idea, that nobody knows what life is about or what we are doing here, is too debilitating to give to a child.

Cranes, Bicyclists, and Other Birds in Whitney Valley

As I think about our adventure in Whitney Valley, I wander backward and forward through time. I see into my memory according to related events, without strong reference to the progression of time. I think of our experience with the Unity school, and I see Juniper when she was six years old, solidly built, round faced, short brown hair, an adventuresome but relaxed person, growing rapidly into the world around her, filled with interest, seeking knowledge and creative experience.

I think of Amanda reading with me in the garden and asking for my help with new words, and I see Amanda when she was four, tall for her age, thin, with long, golden red hair, paler than Juniper, intense and forceful, sometimes worried, was she learning fast enough? Was any interesting part of existence going to escape from her? Intensely creative, she tried to keep up with Juniper but she branched forcefully off into her individual existence and her own directions.

To locate us now in the stream of time, I return to the springtime I began this narration with, when Juniper was nine, Amanda was seven, and we had lived in Whitney Valley five years.

Warm sunshine has melted most of the snow from Whitney Valley. Patches of snow linger in north slope and where forest shades the ground. Two cranes fly over the house, calling, just after daylight. I wake fast from deep sleep, pleased to share the morning with these majestic birds calling out their exuberance over being alive this fine spring day. I follow their example and sing to the early morning. All

members of my family wake and rapidly approach breakfast. I start a fire in the cookstove this cold morning and cook pancakes made of every available kind of whole grain flour, with rolled oats, nutritional yeast, and milk and eggs, the only kind of breakfast I understand, most of the time.

We finish breakfast, and I say, “I think the cranes landed between the barn and the river. How would it be if we walk over to the corral and see if we can see them without scaring them off?”

We all put on jackets and walk out to the road and up the road to the corral gate farthest from the meadow. We open that gate enough to slip through and close it again, quietly. We walk through the corral, and we stop and look between and over the corral rails. The meadow slopes down from us west to the river. The cranes feed between us and the river, less than a hundred yards away. They are so alike in appearance, I only know they are a pair, male and female, because we have only one pair in the valley and because they dance the mating dance of sandhill cranes.

One crane approaches the other with its stately walk, stands, then leaps into the air and comes down on two flaps of its wings. It jabs its beak into the ground, stands up straight again and steps gracefully to one side and then the other, with its wings spread, dancing. The other crane goes on eating, and the dancer returns to eating. Then it picks up something from the ground in its beak, gives it to the other crane, and dances again. The male has shown his ability to feed another crane, and I think the female continues to be pleased with whom she has chosen for a mate. The two birds walk away up the meadow, one slightly ahead of the other. They take to wing, calling, fly across the river, across the meadow, and land just short of the timber but in tall enough

grass that we can no longer see them.

We stand quietly for a while and then walk back to the house. The sun shines into the day, and we take our jackets off before we get to the house. We look up sandhill cranes in the book. Juniper says, “It says they eat frogs, fish, crayfish, snakes, and many different kinds of plants.”

I say, “Some of the hay we fed to cattle down where they were eating had a lot of seed in it. That seed fell through the hay when the sheaves hit the ground. With irrigation water down there, the seed is sprouting in clumps. I think that’s what they were eating, sprouts.”

Laura says, “If they like frogs, they must do all right in the valley. It sounds like we have hundreds of frogs in the spring chorus just within earshot of the house.”

I say, “I see lots of garter snakes when I’m irrigating. The plastic dams spread out on the banks of ditches. I almost always find two or three or half a dozen or more snakes under the plastic when I pick it up to move it.”

The book shows how the cranes achieve such volume. The trachea, about five feet long, coils inside them and then extends up the neck, a long instrument of gristle and muscle, alive and flexible. I haven’t seen it in any of the books I read about birds, but my sister, Cheryl, said their call is divided between the two birds. The first part, described as “garoo” by Roger Tory Peterson, comes from one bird, and the “a-a-a-a” follows immediately from the second bird.

After Cheryl told me that, I watched for it. Every time I was able to both see and hear them, it was the way they called.

In the spring of the year, I drove the tractor along the west edge of the meadow, headed for a ditch I wanted to blade. I stood up to drive, leaned forward, and watched the front

wheels and the ground ahead of the wheels, because water runs across there somewhere, and I didn't want to mud up wet ground or get the tractor stuck. I approached a dry ditch and slowed the tractor to cross it. I looked up and around me for the first time in a while.

Fifty feet to my right, a sandhill crane broke into a take-off run. I let the front wheel drop into the ditch, stopped, and watched the bird gain the air and fly away from me. It landed again in about a hundred yards and walked slowly away from me as I eased the tractor across the ditch and sped up again, toward the bird. "Excuse me. I hope you don't think I'm trying to chase you. This is the only place I can get through on dry ground." The bird folded its legs and sank down into the grass. Then there wasn't any bird there anymore. I'm always impressed when one of these tall birds hides in about a foot of grass.

A few days later, I rode the motorcycle along one side of a point of timber that reaches out into the meadow west of the river. When I cleared the point, I was quite close to two sandhill cranes involved in their dance. I stopped, shut the motor off, and watched them. One leaped into the air and came down on two flaps of its wings, then jabbed its beak into the ground while the other went on feeding. They allowed their feeding and jumping to take them away from me until high ground stood between us. I made no attempt to follow them. I had been too richly rewarded to think of changing my policy of going about my business and allowing them to go about theirs.

What I know of birds from observation, I add to by reading, but I know the observations and conclusions that get written up are less reliable than what I see myself. Then there are stories I hear from people around.

Guy said a stock dog, a blue heeler that belonged to a ranch hand, attacked one of the cranes near their nest some years ago, and the crane severely injured and nearly killed the dog before it was able to escape. I filed Guy's account in my mind under "possible but not observed," as I have many of the stories I hear about wild animals. The birds are certainly large, and I'm sure they could do some damage if they chose to fight rather than flee.

Late spring, I rode the motorcycle down to the sawmill field to change the way the water flowed from ditches and spread across the meadow. A woman with a camera walked from the fenced meadow back toward her car, parked near the gate. She said, "I was just taking some pictures. Is it all right to walk around and take pictures?"

"Sure. Go wherever you want to go, as long as you go on foot. Don't go in any of the buildings, because you can't tell where you might go through a floor or one of the buildings might start falling down around you."

"What are those big birds?"

"Sandhill cranes."

"I wanted to try to get some closer pictures, but I didn't know if they would attack me."

I thought that was funny, but I didn't tell her that. I said, "They won't hurt you. I don't think you'll get closer than about a hundred yards anyway."

Imagination heavily embroiders our understanding of wild animals. I tried to straighten a friend out about the often entirely mythical killing powers attributed to coyotes. He said, "I suppose you're going to defend eagles too."

"Against what?"

"A guy I know saw an eagle come in full speed, grab a calf and fly away with it without even slowing down."

I roared with laughter. I couldn't help it. This was the image that came into my mind: An eagle dives high-speed, sinks its talons into a calf, and is immediately stopped by the animal's weight, pivots around its engaged talons and slams into the calf or past it into the ground at sixty miles an hour, ka-wham.

I told Gail, "An eagle would have a tough time killing a calf, and it couldn't begin to move the animal. I know the birds look huge, but they don't weigh even fifteen pounds, and they can't lift that much weight. It can be a fair struggle for an eagle to fly with a varying hare." It can be disappointing to have spectacular myths debunked, so Gail remained skeptical.

Most days and nights stay warmer as summer approaches the valley, though storms still blow in. In early June, I cleared debris from a ditch near the highway. Snow blew in the wind. I wore gloves, and I could still feel my fingers, so I kept working. I worked within a hundred yards of the house. I could get there in a hurry if the storm got too fierce.

The highway is part of a bicycle route. Bicyclists carry ideas, imprinted in their minds by inaccurate rumors and experience in other parts of the country, of June as a dependably warm time of year.

A man with grizzled hair and beard, and a younger man pedaled down the highway, bent to the wind, faces down to keep the snow from blowing into their eyes. They saw me and turned down the county road and stopped. The older man asked me "Don't you ever have any good weather?"

I couldn't help myself. I said, "I don't know yet. I've only lived here five years." I could see why they didn't find it as funny as I did. They weren't backed up by a warm house a hundred yards away. I said, "This snow might keep up for a

while yet. Come on down to the house, and I'll fix some hot tea."

Laura, Amanda, and Juniper, who would usually have been there with a fire going, had gone to town. But it took me only a few minutes to get a blaze roaring in the kitchen stove, and a few more minutes to bring water to a boil for tea. My guests stood gratefully close to the hot stove. We talked amiably about the weather, local wildlife, my job, and where and when they had started their trip, weeks and hundreds of miles before.

People ride bicycles clear across this wide nation. More power to them, but someone should write on the maps, "This area has unpredictable weather. Go prepared with all manner of clothing, tents, and sleeping gear."

We finished our second cup of tea. Their clothing had almost dried. Clouds and snow blew away to the east. The sun shone warmly, and the wind calmed to a pleasant breeze.

The youngest man asked, "Will the sunshine last?"

"There isn't any way to tell. If you're not equipped for bad weather, you should make all possible speed over Huckleberry Summit. Once you clear that, it's downhill most of the way into Baker, about forty-three miles from here. You're a couple of thousand feet lower there, and whatever the worst of the weather does, it'll be warmer than here."

They pedaled away into the warm afternoon. I watched until they rode out of sight over the first hill. Then I picked up my shovel and walked back to the ditch I'd been working on.

Cyclists continued to come through, alone, in pairs, in small groups, and in groups of ten or fifteen. Some of them stopped when they saw signs of human habitation in one of the weathered old buildings that made up the town of

Whitney. Some of them needed to fill their water bottles. Since we brought in our drinking water, I hesitated, but then I decided the only acceptable policy was to give freely of our water. We brought it in a vehicle with a motor. Bicyclists would have to pedal several miles out of their way to get good drinking water.

By giving refuge from storms, by giving water, tea, advice on good places to pitch tents, sometimes the use of our yard for tents, sometimes a meal, we met and shared existence with a wide variety of people. Sometimes, when the small cabin across the road was not being used, we offered that for a night's lodging.

Amanda and Juniper loved to meet the people who rode into the yard, and they loved to hear about their adventures. They didn't have the opportunity to meet very many new people, so we liked it when people stopped.

Two young men from New Jersey accepted the offer of a night's lodging and also ate dinner with us. The contrast between their city background and our rural habitat was of enough interest to keep conversation going rather late.

The mountain stayed unusually warm as dark settled in Whitney Valley, and a million bright stars shone above us. After a long time of silence in the yard there in the small mountain valley, one of the visitors said, "You have stars in the sky here. They took those away from us in the city many years ago."

A woman and a man rode horses across the nation one summer early in our Whitney experience and stayed an afternoon and a night in Whitney. The woman looked at Amanda and said, "She looks like Pippi Longstockings" and formed an immediate bond, since Amanda and Juniper had read of Pippi Longstockings and admired her strength, her

independence, and her adventures. The young woman strengthened that bond when she put Juniper and Amanda into the saddles and led the horses around the yard for their first time horseback. She told about her adventures crossing the nation horseback, and Amanda and Juniper listened with rapt attention.

Juniper and Amanda were thrilled to visit with adventurous travelers, and travelers were interested in the way we lived and in the two unusual, very communicative girls.

Whether they arrived on two wheels or four, by gasoline, pedal, or hay power, many tourists told us, "Oh, I would love to live like this if only my husband (or wife, girlfriend, boyfriend, economic situation, or family) would let me."

I thought that was easy to say. Living without plumbing or electricity, with limited social contact, with a large garden, and with children educated at home, seems like a romantic way to live and fulfill the American dream of living simply, with rugged independence and self-sufficiency. Giving up modern conveniences and living close to the bone, not just for a vacation, but year round, might dim the bright, romantic ideals for many.

But I thought if any among our visitors from the modern world could actually do it, they probably would be among those who traveled through these mountains by pedal power or horse power and stayed with their course no matter how steep the mountain road and no matter what weather the days and nights brought them.

The willows along the valley's streams grow new, green leaves. Amanda and Juniper run barefoot parts of most days. They play more complex games than I can keep track of. They are characters from their reading and characters they

make up themselves. Some of their plays continue from day to day. They ask me to make them wooden swords, and I split western larch and carve it smooth. They seem happy with what I have made, carry swords in their belts, and wear capes that blow in the wind.

Swallows pick up mud in the garden, along the road, and wherever else mud is available, and build their mud nests in the barn, under the eaves of the barn, and under the eaves of other buildings around. People tell me don't let swallows build nests on the house because they carry bedbugs, and we will have bedbugs in our house.

Guy says swabbing the eaves with oil will keep swallows from building nests there. They don't build nests in the eaves of the cabin he uses each spring, though he hasn't oiled it for several years. I haven't oiled our eaves, and the swallows build nests there. Unless I see definite evidence that they shouldn't be there, I'll let them build.

When swallows aren't busy getting mud or keeping eggs warm, they swoop around in zig zag flight and catch insects for themselves and their young. Whitney Valley supports plenty of insects. The mosquitoes particularly can be a problem to people, so I welcome this natural form of insect control.

I go to the shop or to the barn to get something or to work, and the swallows dive close and harass me in swallow language. I tell them I live here too and have business I must be about in their vicinity. They are only concerned for their nests, eggs, and young.

I ride the motorcycle up the ranch, parallel to the old railroad grade. A killdeer flies up from the grass, flies in front of me, and then, in erratic flight, swerves to the left. Her message is, "I am injured. Follow me, and you can surely

catch me.” I’m already past the place where she flew up from, and her eggs are safe, so I refuse to turn aside. She swerves and flies directly in front of me. She is determined to lead me. I laugh and follow her up the meadow. After about a hundred yards, she turns and flies away. I admire her refusal to be thwarted.

I ride through tall grass. A wapiti calf jumps up directly in front of me. Its mother tucked it down in the grass and told it to stay put, and it obeyed instructions so well, it didn’t break cover until I was almost on it. I turn hard to the left to avoid hitting the calf, skid, drop the bike, sail over the handlebars, hit the ground, roll, come up on my knees, and watch the calf. Long-legged, long-necked, with a lot of deep red in its coat, with large, light spots, it runs and slows and stops. I think this beautiful, very young wild animal has no idea what the loud, fast performance I am just finishing is all about.

I stand up, and the long-legged calf walks away, toward the timber, then trots, but it doesn’t seem to know where to go. It slows, trots one way and then back, stops, and walks into the tall grass in the edge of the sparse lodgepole just beyond the edge of the hay ground. The best thing for me to do is get out of there before I drive it farther from where it’s supposed to be. I get the bike up, restart it, and ride away from the calf, on up the meadow.

The water flows the way I want it to, and I’m finished with this piece of meadow for today, so I head back down the ranch. I ride above the area where so many geese congregate, trying to keep enough distance to avoid bothering them.

Two of the geese get as low to the ground as they can and run for the river. They cross an area of short grass, and I see ten little puffs of yellow goslings running between them. All of them run over the bank, into the river in one long, smooth

motion, the lead goose, ten goslings in a line, and then the rear-guard goose.

40 Steers, One Dog, and One Man

The days and nights turn warmer. The level of water in the north fork of the Burnt River drops, and not enough water flows down my ditches. I cross the river and ride up the ranch, open the gate at the top, and ride the motorcycle onto Rico's ranch about two hundred yards to the log crib, a structure of large logs backed by rocks, that holds the banks of the river in an eighteen-foot-wide constriction. Large rocks stabilize the bottom of the river inside the crib, and heavy wire netting holds the rocks in place. A log crosses the top of the crib, about six feet above the water.

I park the motorcycle and set boards from the top log down into the river against a brace across the front of the crib. I span the gaps between those boards with more boards, to build a partial dam and raise the level of flowing water until as much water goes down the ditch that exits from the river above the dam as I want. Water flowing down that ditch irrigates everything across the river from the house on the Rouse brother's ranch.

The next day, I drive the tractor up the highway to Rico Cow Camp and down to the river. With the back blade on the tractor, I blade out gravel the river has washed into the mouth of the ditch that starts there and comes all the way down the side of the river our house sits on, so I can keep that ditch running full. I don't put any rocks in the river yet, to divert more water into the ditch. I'll do that after the river drops more.

I look at part of the ranch every day from the motorcycle. Sometimes I travel a long, fast tour and check a large part of the ranch to see if everything is as it should be. Sometimes I

travel a shorter tour, because I have to stop and shovel dirt to repair ditches or to change the flow of water onto the meadow.

Abundant gifts come to us this year. Sometimes, other springs, I found a few meadow mushrooms (*agaricus arvensis*) in all my travels on the meadow. This year, more than a dozen grow under the clothesline, right in the back yard, and I find more than a dozen of the smooth, white, pink-gilled mushrooms along the fence on the north side of the mill field. Long ago, we gave up any attempt to cook these mushrooms. They never make it into the house, because we eat them raw where we pick them.

Amanda and Juniper bring what they find to me to confirm that they are meadow mushrooms before they eat them.

Puffballs grow along the driveway, a few at a time, for more than a week. These are apparently *calvatia gigantia*. Their smooth surface leads me to this classification, though they are small for this variety. The largest are about four inches in diameter. I don't worry about the exact classification of puffballs, since any white puffballs that don't have stems (so they are definitely puffballs and not mushrooms) that grow in this area are edible and delicious.

Rick, who tended cattle in National Forest grazing allotments and stayed with his family at Cow Camp, came to visit late spring the second year we were here and asked me, "Do you eat mushrooms?"

"The ones I know, I do."

"Do you know puffballs?"

"Yes. I like puffballs."

"Well, I got one in the pickup as big as your head."

I thought he must be exaggerating, but we walked out to

his pickup, and he reached in and got the puffball. It was bigger than my head. He left me half of it, and I ate several inch-thick slices that evening, fried. I have heard puffballs won't dry well, because they turn green and go to spores, but I sliced part of that one thin and successfully dried it in the oven.

Laura, Juniper, and Amanda had gone to California to visit Laura's family, so they didn't help me eat that one, though they have helped with others. As far as I can tell, there is no difference in flavor in the small puffballs or the very large ones. They are good raw or cooked.

The water level in my ditches drops again, and I ride up the ranch to put more boards in the dam. The meadow flushes purple with elephant head flowers. Small, purple flowers that look like elephant's heads, complete with upward curving trunks, foreheads, and large ears, densely cover stems a foot to two feet tall. Wild iris bloom, blue camas, and blue widow grass. Above the irrigated ground, tall, yellow buttercups flower. Several kinds of small white flowers grow close to the ground and show through growing grasses.

Sometimes, when I head home after working on the meadow, I lean down from the motorcycle and pick a bouquet for Laura. I know about not picking wildflowers, but on a meadow that will soon be cut for hay, I don't worry about it.

Steers graze on the Rico ranch now, so I close the gate behind me.

The first year I irrigated, I rode through the gate, put the bike on its kickstand, shut the gate behind me, remounted, and rode. Steers, part simmental and much bigger than the herefords I usually work around, came out of the willows in groups at a gallop to see what was going on. I didn't know

they wouldn't gallop right over me and stampede me and the machine to dust. I didn't think they would; I'd never read newspaper accounts of herds of steers stomping ranch hands to death, but I wasn't sure.

John and Mike love a good laugh. I'm sure they'd throw their heads back and roar if I said, "I can't get in to work on the log-crib dam. The Ricos put a herd of steers in there, and I'm afraid they're going to gang up and trample me if I try. I think you'd better send up a couple of guards to get me through."

Ha ha ha. I know it would be funny to tell it, but at the moment, I'm having trouble mustering a laugh, because about thirty steers have me nearly surrounded, six or eight feet from me. They average about six-hundred pounds each, and even if they're not aggressive, I want to be sure they're careful with all that weight and all those hooves. "Go on, dog. Move 'em out of here. Clear me a road." For all I know, they keep it hushed up when herds of steers stomp ranch hands to death. Newspapers don't print everything that happens.

I was used to herefords, who would leave my work area after a half-loud suggestion, who were curious, but only from at least thirty feet away and only if I didn't move fast, who would bunch up and flee at a mere suggestion of action by the dog. My dog was used to herefords, too. These steers puzzled him. He ran back and forth in front of them. Herefords would have bunched up and turned away from a dog galloping past their noses, but these steers obviously find the dog an interesting novelty, and they all surge forward in a group to get a closer look.

This mass movement doesn't lend the dog any great sense of confidence. Me neither, since the dog retreats behind me.

“How many times have I told you not to retreat to me in times of danger but lead the danger away from me? Obviously, the Ricos don’t use dogs to work these cattle.”

I’m starting to wonder if I might be marooned here for days because nobody will back up. I get off the bike, yell, and wave my arms. The steers in front of me back up a step or two. The ones I’m not directly facing move a step or two closer, curious about what I’m doing. “Do it again, dog. Bite some noses.”

When dogs work with men on horses, everybody reinforces everybody else. The dogs start motion in the herd, and the men on horses increase and organize the motion. Or the other way around. The cattle learn the cues and react to any one of them. One man on a horse, wanting cows to move, means move. A dog, moving like a dog does when it wants cows to move, means move. These steers aren’t trained at all. The dog circles, nips noses, gets most of them turned around, nips flanks and heels and moves them twenty feet.

The dog can only bite one steer at a time. The bites are painful, but curiosity is a more powerful stimulus. The steers’ escape dwindles, and they turn back to get a closer look at this grey, white, black and blue, stub-tailed dog. He can’t tell the desire to get a close look from the desire to stomp him to death any better than I can, and he breaks and runs, with thirty steers thundering close behind him.

It’s almost funny when it’s the dog they have on the run, because I’m sure they aren’t going to stomp him. If his nerve hadn’t deserted him, they wouldn’t be after him. But it isn’t quite funny, because I still remember forty-five seconds ago, when I was the one having trouble keeping my nerve. He takes them away from me, out across the meadow, so I jump on the motorcycle, start it, and ride to the log-crib dam.

I'd rather flee off the field to avoid another confrontation, but the log-crib does need my attention, and I'm more and more convinced the steers will not attack, though it's easiest to believe that when they're a hundred feet or farther from me. I climb down into the log-crib and work behind the boards already in place. I drop two wide boards into place, step on them and force them underwater. The current and the weight of the water hold the boards in place. The river above the dam rises.

Forty steers stand on the bank above the crib, looking down at me. "Hi, you guys. Don't you have any grass to eat or any cud to chew or anything like that? What's so entertaining about one ranch hand and one dog?"

I guess anything is entertaining when you're stuck in one pasture all summer on your way to becoming supermarket beef.

I climb over the boards and around the bank upstream of the crib, where workers dumped large rocks down the bank years ago to protect the dirt against erosion. Steers won't walk on the rocks, because they know they might slip and break a leg.

I sit on the steel headworks of the ditch and wait while the water rises. I check the level by standing my shovel on the bottom and looking at how high up the handle the water marks. It's about three inches higher than I planned for, and that much over is no problem.

My dog lies in the shade of a willow bush and waits for me. As long as the steers aren't stampeding after him, he isn't afraid of them. Neither am I. This takes a little work in my thoughts to convince myself. They haven't knocked over the motorcycle, though they've milled all around it.

I look at it like this: I have to come up here a lot, and the

steers are going to be here until fall. Logically, I'm convinced they won't hurt me. I have two clear memories that help.

We separate male from female calves in the big corral. Mike Rouse and I stand just inside a galloping circle of hereford calves. Mike stands with his back to the calves going by full speed behind him. They get closer and closer to him, and he arches his back a little, to give them an extra six inches or so of room to go by. His arched back is both a joke, kind of look out, there they go again, and a serious motion. He knows they won't hit him, and he demonstrates his knowledge.

The other memory comes from that same day. Ranchers get together and neighbor, as they call it; they help each other with work that takes more workers than each has in his crew. A small man, bent with age and slow-moving, stands in an open gate to keep calves that shouldn't go through from going through. The herd gallops toward the gate. The small, old man flips up his hands without raising his arms more than a few inches. All the calves skid into a turn and gallop by the gate without trying to go through.

The calves we worked with were herefords, smaller and younger, but herefords or simmentals, these steers here are about the same. Eventually, my sense of reason pretty well wins out over the small reservoir of fear I'm trying to work out, and I leave the headworks and walk over to the motorcycle. The steers retreat and give me eight or ten feet of space. I start the bike and ride toward the steers. They move enough to give me space to ride through. Then they come along with me, still intensely interested in what I'm doing. I ride slowly. It's when they're at a gallop that I'm afraid they'll misjudge and trample me by mistake.

We form a dignified procession, one dog leading, one man

on a motorcycle next, riding as slowly as he can ride and still maintain his balance, forty steers patiently pacing just behind and on both sides of the man on the motorcycle. I open the gate just wide enough to squeeze through. I shut it behind us, relieved to be back in hereford country.

It would be nice if I could say I was never afraid of the steers again, but I was always edgy around large bunches of them, because they liked to get so close, but I was a lot more confident after that.

A hundred yards east of the boundary fence, a ditch flows by the edge of dense willows. Beavers have backed water into a pond through the willows, clear to the bank of the river. Throughout the irrigation season, we argue about water rights. I remove their dam so water will flow down the ditch and irrigate about 30 acres of hay ground. Then the beavers rebuild the dam, and the next day, I take it out again. Two mounds rise, one each side of the ditch, of limbs and mud workers before me and I removed from the beaver dam over the years. I think the mounds would fill two ten-yard dump trucks, maybe with some left over.

This time when I stop, a large beaver swims back and forth in the open part of the pond, just above the dam. It obviously isn't afraid of me or the dog, and that startles me, because it is unusual behavior for a beaver. They are normally very shy. Only when I say, "Hey beaver, maybe we could work out an agreement about the water-rights here" does it dive below the surface and swim into the part of the pond where willows grow densely.

I remove the dam. I use the pitchfork to lift limbs and the shovel to move mud. I can't see into the muddy water, and I'm jumpy. I'm not sure the beaver isn't down in the muddy water where I'm knee deep. Beavers aren't aggressive, but it

has a legitimate grievance, and an animal that can chew trees down could take a significant chunk out of my leg. That's strictly a human perspective, and I remove the dam, and the water flows down the ditch. I don't see the beaver again.

Most ranchers I've talked with would happily eliminate all the beavers in this country. Beavers dam ditches, plug culverts, and dig their own ditches across hay ground, to get water to more habitat they've decided to use. Their work often becomes a nuisance to irrigators and harvesters.

However, beavers help prevent erosion. Beavers' ponds become habitat for ducks and other water birds and marsh birds. Ponding the water leads to lush plant growth, which provides food and cover for many animals.

Streams beavers have been eliminated from often channel deep. High water carries away large chunks of stream bank. The ranch west of the Rouse Brother's ranch shows how short-sighted action often redounds to man's detriment. The owners eliminated the beavers and pulled the willows along the river, not willing to have willows grow where grass could grow and make feed for their cattle. With no beavers to slow the water, with no willow roots to hold the soil, the river eroded ten to fifteen feet deep and very wide. Every spring, rushing high water washes huge chunks of bank into the river, breaks them up, and carries the dirt downstream.

The industrious workers on that ranch lost far more grass than they would have gained if every willow bush gave way to grass. Then they dumped trees and stumps into the river to try to slow it down, to decrease erosion. Trees and stumps floated into irrigation works of downstream ranches during high water and created problems. Downstream ranchers heated up phone lines and threatened to sue.

Eventually, the beavers came back. Willows grow on

sandbars in the river and along some of the banks, and now, years later, willows and beavers stabilize parts of the river, but the damage is large, and it isn't finished yet.

[Making a Living Cutting Firewood](#)

Pine beetles bore through the bark of pine trees and eat the cambium, girdle the tree, and the tree dies. Some trees drown the beetles in pitch and survive the attack. Most trees don't survive.

Along the west boundary and the south boundary of the ranch, beetle-killed lodgepole pine trees shared the ridge with live lodgepole, second growth ponderosa pine, widely spaced western larch, and a few Douglas fir trees. Some dead lodgepole blew down. Some falling trees hung up in standing trees. More trees fell every time the wind blew and sometimes when there wasn't any wind.

Standing dead trees needed to come down so they wouldn't continue to blow down on fences and in ditches that brought water through the edge of the timber onto the grass-growing meadows. I set to work clearing out dead trees.

I had no one to show me how to fall standing trees. I read instructions, added falling wedges and a heavy single bit axe, to drive the wedges, to my tools and approached dead lodgepole pine trees. At first, it was a time of trembling, because there is a great gap between instructions printed on the page and a tree tipping from its stump, falling with a rushing sound through the air, and slamming with great noise of impact and breaking branches to the ground.

But no large gap separates fear and caution. Throughout my eight and a half years of falling trees in Whitney Valley, I felt no shame at staying a little afraid of the work I did. I thought most workers who cut themselves with chain saws or got hit by falling trees had been overconfident.

At first, I selected trees clear of thickets, with a slight

lean. I cut a notch a third of the way through each tree, close to the ground, facing the way I wanted the tree to fall. Then I cut toward the notch from the opposite side of the tree. Each tree started tipping before I cut all the way through, and the remaining hinge of uncut wood held the tree to the stump until its fall in the arc it had started was assured. In a correctly-cut tree, the hinge broke before the tree hit the ground.

A tree with no lean will still fall into the notch, because its support on the stump in that direction is gone. Falling wedges are for poor judgement, “I thought it would tip that direction, but it won’t” or for trees that must fall in an unnatural direction.

I drove the wedges into the cut behind the tree, behind the bar and chain, or after I removed the saw from the cut. The wedges opened the cut wider and wider as I drove them in, tilting the tree toward the face notch until the tree tipped far enough that its weight started the falling arc. I worked from the book, and everything worked exactly as the book said it would, except... dead trees are unpredictable. The brittle wood breaks in unpredictable ways. Sometimes, the wood low on the tree rots; the predictability provided by a strong hinge the tree pivots from disappears; and the tree falls wild.

I tried to see everything that could happen, plan alternate escape routes in case my predictions weren’t accurate, and watch everything until all motion ceased. Several times, brittle trees broke as they fell, and the tops came down behind the stump, where I had been standing.

I worked my way up the big ditch that ran down through the edge of the timber. I dropped dead trees, cut them into firewood lengths, and piled the tops and limbs for later burning. On the high bank of the ditch, I aimed a big

lodgepole straight across the ditch. I walked away as it tipped, then stopped and watched.

The brittle hinge broke too soon, and the tree turned from the path I had planned for it. It hit another dead lodgepole on the opposite bank. That tree broke at the base, fell directly away from the first tree, hit and slid down a third dead tree, which broke at the base. I watched the escalating action with a sense of wonder and walked rapidly down the ditch bank so I stood in the clear when the top of the third tree shattered violently on the ground where I had been standing.

Hoo, ha. I put my saw down, flexed my arms, did a little dance above the ditch, bowed this way and that, to the trees and whatever other wildlife might be interested. I was a man of power, falling three trees with one cut. I thought of sewing it into my suspenders, "Three at one blow." Indeed, indeed. That brightened my day. Also made me aware of how careful I needed to be to stay in good shape through this dead-timber-clearing project.

I picked up my saw, walked up the ditch bank, and started reducing my trophies of the day to mundane lengths of firewood.

As I had time, I cleared more fallen trees from the big ditch through the edge of the timber, and from the fence above the ditch. I cleared access to the fence and the ditch. I dropped and cut up standing dead trees so they wouldn't fall and start the hard work over again.

Friends and relations came out and cut firewood. We piled leftover limbs and tops for later burning.

Bernard came up, hunted elk in the fall, and stayed in the phone cabin down the road from us. He asked me what I would charge to cut him five cords of firewood if he picked it up where I cut it. I said twenty dollars a cord, and he told me

when he'd be up to get it.

Snowstorms hit Whitney Valley. In three days, working part of each day, I cut five cords of wood and bunched it up so it wouldn't get lost under snow. Part of the time, I worked in a snowstorm. It wasn't the first time I'd worked in snow blowing in the wind, so I kept cutting wood. I liked working in the storm, just me, the work, and snow flakes floating down densely, closing out the world beyond my work area.

Bernard showed up early in the morning. Snow lay eight inches deep on the meadow, and more snow drifted down from a dark sky. Bernard brought his son-in-law with him. I volunteered to help load so they could get out before the snow got too deep. We forded the river and crossed the meadow. Bernard backed the truck into the timber, and we loaded wood for about three hours. Snow kept falling. We filled the truck and rounded the load as high as it would go without wood falling off, and we climbed into the cab.

Bernard drove back across the meadow. On the way down the bank into the ford in the river, he locked up the brakes, and we slid toward the opposite bank when we should have started into a sharp turn. I yelled, "Get off the brakes," and he did. With the wheels rolling instead of sliding, the truck turned as we wanted it to. We roared through the shallow river, up the east bank, across the meadow, around the barn, and onto the road. I relaxed. We made it. I had wondered several times if we would.

Bernard made me out a check and added five dollars a cord. I didn't object. I thanked him, and we said our "see you next year"s. Bernard, son-in-law, truck, and five cords of wood drove away down the road. I took the check into the house and showed it to Laura. "Gas money. Grocery money."

The snow from that storm stayed for winter, and more fell

on top of it. It was too late to cut and sell more wood that year, but I was ready to go the next year as soon as we cut the hay and cleared it off the meadow. I phoned Mike and asked him, “Why don’t I get off the payroll for a while and see if I can make a living cutting firewood from the dead lodgepole?”

He consulted with John and then said, “Sure, go do it.” So I did. Cutting and selling wood made the difference between making a living and almost making a living.

Bernard passed the word that I had sound, dry, lodgepole firewood for sale. People showed up late summer and early fall and bought firewood. Most of them farmed or ranched in the Treasure Valley and owned trucks that would haul five cords of wood or more. My price, that second year, was \$25.00 a cord, and I sold all the wood I could cut as fast as I could cut it.

I like cutting firewood. I usually don’t like working with noisy machines, and a chain saw is very noisy, but I use ear-protectors, and that helps. I like looking behind me, where I’ve taken out the firewood and piled and burned the tops and limbs, and seeing what looks like a park. Grass grows green. A few green trees still grow, and lodgepole saplings, where, a year before, even getting through the area on foot was a job, and not much grew under or up through the dead wood jackstrawed on the ground.

I also like it because I make a good wage cutting and selling wood, and it’s been years since I’ve been able to make a good wage. In an area with large trees, with trunks clear of limbs for a long ways up the tree, so I don’t use a lot of my time cutting limbs off the trees, I sometimes cut a cord of wood an hour. It’s an exciting goal to shoot for, and even in much worse cutting, I cut more than two cords in a six-hour

workday.

Having more money allows us to buy a few things that make it easier for Laura. If the necessary chores are easier for her, existence is easier for all of us.

I meet people who come up to buy wood. We talk about how we live, what we think about, and how the world looks to us. The same people come back the next year and the year after that, and I get to hear about changes time brings to their lives and their perspectives. It's an interesting way to keep in touch with some of what's happening in the world.

Bernard sent Mike and Tammy up to buy firewood late summer. They brought a stock truck with a sixteen-foot-long bed, and they loaded five cords of firewood. They said they had a friend who owned a Peterbilt diesel, with a twenty-eight foot bed. He wanted to bring it up and get a load of wood. I said, "Bring it up. We'll go up the fence line, and you can load it all in one place up there."

I've seen hundreds of trucks like that on the highway, and they are big, but until I saw the truck off the highway on the narrow, rough dirt road alongside the fence, I didn't know just how much bigger than a pickup or a stock truck they are. I quaked a little. I had cut my turns wide all the way up the fence, and I had been confident anything under eight feet wide could pass, but when I actually saw the huge truck beside the fence, I wasn't so sure. I didn't betray my sudden doubt. "Follow me," I said, and I climbed on the tractor and drove up the road. The truck rumbled along behind me.

I turned around and looked at the truck coming behind me. Wow. Right there, where it's coming through, I broke a mirror off the pickup last summer because the road was too narrow then to squeeze through. And where the truck is now, a month ago, four dead trees crisscrossed above the fence,

and a small pickup couldn't pass under. And I hope I made this next turn wide enough.

Scrape. Wires squealed. I got too close to the fence and scraped it with the tractor. I didn't break anything, but I stretched wires and bent steel posts. I have to watch where I'm going and quit looking at that truck so much. Boom. I ran the front wheel of the tractor into a small tree, bounced back, and almost threw myself off the tractor. It's a good thing I was going slow. I sat down and forced myself to watch the road ahead of me. I hope nobody saw me hit that tree, but I'm sure they did, because they're right behind me.

They got all the way up the road to the wood and loaded eight and a half cords. I cut several stumps so they had enough room to turn around, and they turned around, drove back down the fence line, across the meadow, forded the river, drove up onto the county road, and headed home. I don't think they were particularly impressed with the feat of getting that huge truck to the wood, but they didn't know the history of clearing that road the way I did.

Two days later, I forded the river at daylight to cut wood. Two ravens took off from the gravel bar and flew up the river. A coyote saw the pickup emerge from the willows onto the meadow and loped up into the timber. Frost crystals on tall grass along the edge of the timber separated the light of rising sun into spheres of rainbow-colored light, each radiating rainbow colors. I drove onto the hill as fifteen wapiti left my work area. They eat the dark green and black moss that grows on dead trees. After I've gone for the day, they browse the newly-down trees.

When Cheryl worked with me cutting wood, we drove into our work area when the wapiti were still there. Newly fallen trees, jackstrawed across each other, limited their

passage, and they ran back toward us. Going by so close to us put them panicky as they galloped up the dirt road along the fence. One young bull tried to take a shorter route through the fence. He hit the four tightly-stretched barbed wires at a gallop almost parallel to the fence and bounced away from it, hit it again, harder, and bounced farther, still in a full gallop, hit it again, so hard, it threw him off his feet. He rolled all the way over, regained his feet, hardly slowing, and galloped away from the fence, up the hill.

I missed any potential the spike's battle with the fence might have had for humor, because I had some idea what pain and injury running into a barbed wire fence could cause. The herd hits barbed-wire fence at a head-on gallop when panicked and breaks all four strands. That must injure the leaders. So I move slowly and give them time to clear the area in a leisurely fashion. I'm not in any hurry to go to work. I'm still looking.

I drive into my work area and unload my tools. I start the saw and drop several trees, limb them, and buck firewood lengths. Two black and white, red-headed woodpeckers fly in close, within a few feet of the screaming saw, and pick fat white grubs from the stumps and butts of trees I've just cut. I wear ear protectors. I tell the woodpeckers about ear protectors, but they don't hear me over the sound of the saw, or they don't care. A bird who hammers its head against tree trunks might not be sensitive to some of what I'm sensitive to. I finally have to say, it's up to the birds. They could harvest their meals when I shut the saw off to pile limbs and tops or to work on the saw.

Carpenter ants build rooms, passageways, and communities in dead wood. They aren't aggressive, but if they do bite, those large, wood-chomping mandibles make a

deep and painful job of it. When I eat lunch, I watch them walk around on me, but I don't let them get where they might feel trapped.

Some days, I start late and quit late, because I see different animals, lighting, and happenings in the evening than I see in the morning. My hours are my own. I need to work enough to make a living, but, since I usually can't work all the daylight hours anyway, when I do the work is up to me. "A living" means more than just earning enough money to pay for needs. Earning a living includes seeing some of the wildlife living on and near the meadow. Earning a living includes participating in my family's adventures, education, and dreams. Earning a living includes sitting under a tree and thinking. Earning a living includes lying down in the sun on a cool day or in the shade on a hot day and sleeping for an hour so I'll feel like working more in the afternoon.

I'll remember these experiences when I'm three score and ten, while a lot of what I do just to make money will fade from my memory.

Doc and I Shoot up Whitney Valley

I knew Doc and his wife and daughter lived in one of the cabins on the next ranch up the valley, but I hadn't met them. I loaded rocks for landscaping our garden into the pickup near the highway. Doc and his wife Kathy and a friend, Melvin, saw me and stopped and helped load rocks.

Melvin and Doc had been drinking. They threw rocks into the pickup. I said, "Hey you guys. Set the rocks in. Don't throw them." They set in the next two or three rocks each, but then they forgot and threw them again. I watched a couple of big rocks land. They didn't damage anything, and it was better to have loud, careless help than none at all, so I didn't say anything more about setting the rocks down.

Doc said, "The elk stay up here through the winter. They paw through the snow to the grass, and they eat moss and aspen bark and willow bark."

Melvin said, "The hell they do. They go down to lower country, where it's warmer, and the snow isn't as deep. I guess you think they're stupid."

"I don't think they're stupid. I just happen to know they stay up here through the winter."

They covered the same ground again and again, gaining nothing, and they laced their arguments heavily with obscene language. I don't like being around people who have been drinking, but they did help me load the pickup, so I invited them to stop by the house for coffee or tea. They piled into Doc's pickup and followed me to the house, where they continued the argument about what elk did in the winter.

I said, "I'm going to have to ask you to tone down your language. My daughters don't need to hear a lot of that kind

of language.”

Laura said, “Not to mention your wife.”

Kathy said, “I don’t like it too well myself, even though I’m around a lot of it a lot of the time.”

They made an effort, but they soon forgot. Kathy said, “Why don’t you guys talk about something else? You’re not getting anywhere.”

Doc looked at me and said, “I wonder about you. Me and my brothers passed by here a lot, hauling firewood to sell down in Baker. Sometimes you worked in your garden, and you never looked up at us and waved. I decided you must be an unfriendly son of a bitch.”

I said, “Nothing personal meant by it. There’s a lot of traffic by here sometimes. If I look up and wave at everybody who drives by, I won’t get much work done. Besides that, this is my domain. I don’t want to include every stranger who drives by. It distracts from my sense of privacy. Since I didn’t look up and see you, it wasn’t you I wasn’t waving at. It was just anybody who drove by.”

Doc said, “I never thought about that. You didn’t even know who you weren’t waving at. I guess I did take it kind of personal.”

“Nothing personal meant.”

Kathy said, “We need to get Jamie home. She’s been out all day. I need to give her a bath and get her settled down at home.”

Doc didn’t respond to what she said, so I said, “Hey, Doc, do you hear your baby crying? Do you hear what your wife is telling you?”

He looked at me like he thought he might get angry, but then he said, “Yeah. I guess we had better get on home. It’s been a long day.”

They all went out and climbed in Doc's pickup. Doc stopped, with the pickup door still open, and said, "Okay. Now we've met. Maybe you're not as unfriendly as I thought, so you come up for a visit."

I did. Sober, he was more pleasant company. He was still loud, and he still often interrupted Kathy, but he was bearable, and, as I got to know him better, even likable.

A friend had called him Doc, after Doc Holliday, because he was tall and lean, and he carried a .45 caliber revolver in a holster at his side. He told me about some of the fights he'd been in. He knocked a friend's front teeth out one night at a party. His ex-friend swore he would kill Doc. Doc had packed a gun ever since. "It's a small world. Never can tell who you'll run into where." He left the revolver in his pickup when he went into the post office, "because it's against the law to carry a firearm into a post office, and I'll go along with that." After two or three times, to let him be sure no one hid behind a door and no booby traps waited for him, I asked him to include our house as the other place he didn't carry his gun.

He owned an old International two and a half ton truck with a twelve-foot-long bed and stakesides. He cut and hauled firewood and sold it in Baker. Winter shut down his wood cutting operation, but he showed up at my place early in the spring. He said, "Let's go down to the bridge and up that road the other side of the river and cut some posts and poles."

"Doc, we can't get up that road yet. There's still too much snow."

"I'll bet we can get in. We could get in there with the tractor."

"We couldn't get in with the tractor with the wagon

behind it. We might get in with just the tractor, but that would mean yarding everything clear to the road.”

“So? That’s one way to get the poles out. Let’s try it. It might be worth doing. Can’t tell unless we try.”

“Okay. We’ll try it.”

We hooked the wagon to the tractor. Doc rode on the wagon. We left the wagon at the turnoff and took our saws and the tractor up the hill to a stand of dead lodgepole. I slapped the throttle down and mudded across the drainages crossing the dirt road and up the hill to a good stand of beetle-killed lodgepole. We cut forty poles, dragged them down to the road, and chained fifteen of them behind the tractor. Dragging poles, I couldn’t keep up the speed. The front wheels sank into mud where running water had crossed the road and melted the ice and refused to climb the ice shelf on the other side.

Doc had been riding on the poles, making me nervous because I thought he endangered life and limb. He walked up and unhooked the poles from the tractor, but the rear wheels still spun on the ice. We ditched our saws behind a big ponderosa pine and walked two miles. One of Northeastern Oregon’s spring snow flurries hit us hard, with big, wet flakes blowing in the wind. Snow melted on our clothes and soaked us in the first half-mile. I felt colder and colder as we walked up the road into the wind.

Doc thought it was great fun and funny, and I tried to stay in good spirits. I said, “Freezing to death is an easier way to go if you’re laughing all the way.”

We walked over Camp Creek running muddy and high through the big culvert under the road. Cinnamon teal ducks leaped into the wind on noisy wings and flew up the valley. I broke into a trot. Doc trotted with me, but he said, “What’s

your big rush? It's a beautiful day to be walking."

"Beautiful day for running, too."

We ran into the yard, thundered into the house, stood by the kitchen stove, and soaked heat from burning pine. Laura fixed us coffee and food. Amanda and Juniper played noisy games through the house while wind and snow blew through the valley. Doc talked to Juniper and Amanda like they were real people, which won Laura's acceptance of him and increased my friendship for him.

After we ate, dried out, and warmed up, we took Doc's pickup down and tried to pull the tractor out, but every drive wheel spun on ice or in mud. We loaded rocks into Doc's pickup and hauled them back. We jacked up the front of the tractor, filled the mudhole under it with rocks, let the tractor down, hooked the tractor to the poles, the pickup to the tractor, and pulled the poles up onto the county road. We loaded them onto the wagon and went back for the rest. We had to fill another mudhole with rock.

Doc said, "It isn't wasted work. Once we get all the mudholes filled with rock, we can go in and out any time we want to."

We pulled the wagon into the corral and transferred the poles to the truck. Doc took them to town the next day and sold them for thirty dollars. Pretty good. Twelve dollars for gas; nine dollars apiece for a long day's work.

Doc showed up the next morning before I was out of bed. I got up, dressed, and put a pot on for coffee. "What brings you around at daylight?"

"It's fifteen degrees out. The road'll be froze up, and we can get in there."

"We? What's this we stuff? You go get stuck if you want to. By yourself."

“Come on. You got nothing to do. I promised Kathy I wouldn’t work with a chain saw by myself.”

“I promised myself I would never again get stuck and have to dig out. I promised myself that ten years ago, and yesterday is the first time I got stuck since I made that promise.”

“It’s froze up. We won’t get stuck.”

“It’s froze up about an inch thick. First time we break through that thin crust, we’re stuck.”

“We can take the pickup in. It’s light. It won’t sink. It’s light enough, if it sinks, we can pull it out with the tractor. Just see if we can get a load of posts. I can sell them if we can get them.”

So Doc drove his pickup in, and I took the tractor down in case. The drainages we’d rocked in were fine, but he sank axle deep in the next one. I pulled him out, and we hauled two loads of rock to fill that drainage and the next one. By then, the frozen crust had thawed to mud in the warm day.

We took the pickup in early the next morning and cut about a hundred posts. I said, “Good load of posts. The only problem is, it’s warmed up again, and we won’t get out with the load on the pickup.”

“I’m going to at least try it. We don’t know until we try.”

“This time, you’re not going to try it. It’s my road, and I don’t want it torn up any worse than it already is.”

He waited until the next day to drive the pickup out, took the posts to town and got back in the early afternoon. After expenses, we had twenty dollars each. I gave him back ten. He said, “Why’s that?”

“You put a lot more time in than I did. You hauled them to town while I stayed home.”

“No, that’s okay. What you said this morning makes

sense. Why should both of us go and be tied up four or five hours for twenty minutes' work unloading posts? It's fair enough with me just to split it even."

"Doc, what you're doing is obvious. You're trying to get me trapped into working with you."

"Don't you want to earn some money?"

"I like to earn money, but not at the rate we're earning it. I have ranch work to do. I have a garden to take care of. I like to have time with my family. If I have time left over, I can write. It's worth working if it's a fairly high return. Otherwise, I'm falling behind on everything else. Even ranch work pays me about twenty-five dollars a day, and it doesn't take a long day or getting stuck and digging out of mud to get it done."

"Just go with me one more time, Jon. I want to take the big truck in and get a load of poles. I can get more for poles."

"The big truck? That'd be a lot of fun. Don't be satisfied with getting a little, lightweight pickup sunk in the mud. Take something big and get it stuck."

"We won't get stuck. If I chain it up, that truck will go where a four-wheel drive won't go."

"Yeah, straight down into a hole."

"We won't get stuck. I've gone worse places than that with it. It has more flotation and more drive surface than a four-wheel drive."

The guy's got confidence. And ambition. I finally said, "I'll go along and cut poles and help drag the wood out and load it. But if you get stuck, you're on your own. I can't pull that big a truck out with that little wheel tractor."

"Don't worry about it. We won't need it. We won't get stuck."

"You won't get stuck. I don't have anything to do with the

stuck or not stuck part of it. Remember that. I have a feeling you might need to.”

“Now, Jon. You can’t expect to get stuck. You have to keep your thoughts positive about it. No negative vibrations.”

We went in okay. Doc wound it up to about five thousand r.p.m.s to bust through snow drifts lingering in shaded places. Not much of a muffler on the truck. I yelled, “Come off that pedal some. You don’t get traction by spinning your wheels.”

“Got to power it through.”

“Your traction is a lot better if you’re about to spin but not spinning. I don’t want this thing to sink.”

“Now Jon, no negative vibrations. Keep it positive. Positive vibrations will get us through.”

We cut 16-foot poles as we went until we had a load. The morning warmed up. The snow remaining in drifts thawed to wet slush. I said, “Let’s call this a load. We’re going to have to leave it here and come and get it in the morning.”

“The ground’s dry enough up here. I’m going to turn it around so it’s headed out.” He backed and spun the wheels.

“Don’t spin the wheels. Don’t spin the wheels. You’ll sink. I’ll get out and take a look.” I got out and looked at all the wheels. “Nothing’s blocking you. Try to come forward, but come forward easy. Don’t spin the wheels.”

He tried to come forward. The truck wouldn’t move, so he floorboarded it. The wheels spun and threw turf and mud, and the truck sank to the differential.

Doc got out. We walked around the truck and looked it over. “I told you not to spin the wheels.”

“I had to try something, didn’t I?”

“I kept my vibrations positive right up until you were sitting on the axle. Just flooded this outfit with positive vibrations. Either you slipped up on yours, or positive

vibrations won't float a loaded truck over mud. I have a feeling this truck is going to sit here a while."

"Ah, we can get it out."

"We?"

"You wouldn't just abandon me, would you?"

"I would. I told you before we started, if you get stuck, you're on your own."

"We could try the tractor."

"It won't pull it."

"If we jacked it up and blocked up the rear wheels, it probably would. How do we know if we don't try?"

"I know. I already know this truck'll be here until the snow all melts and the ground dries out. But I also know you're not going to allow me any peace until I prove it, so you see if you can get it up out of the holes, and I'll go get the tractor."

I walked across the meadow, which was clear of snow, to the river, and up the river a half-mile, where beavers had built a dam after high water dropped. I crossed the river on the dam. Water ran in sloughs. I zigged and zagged about a mile and waded sloughs. Ducks jumped into the air and flew away from me. I climbed the fence behind the house. I warmed up inside the house, and I changed my wet boots, socks, and trousers. I drove the tractor down the road, across the bridge, and in on the dirt road.

Doc had unloaded his truck, jacked it up, filled the holes with chunks of wood, and let the truck down so the wheels sat on the wood. I hooked a chain to the truck and pulled. The tractor wheels just spun. Doc gave the truck full throttle, and the wheels spun off the wood filling the holes, back down to the differential in new holes, or actually the same holes, but wider.

Doc got out of the truck, looked it over, and shrugged his shoulders. He said, "Fishing's good, this time of year. How'd you get across the river?"

"There's a beaver dam up a ways. I'll show you. I can get the tractor later." We walked up the meadow, taking it easy, watching a multitude of birds celebrating spring in warm sunshine. The truck stayed there until late June.

Doc and I had a lot to talk about and quite a bit to argue about. He shot hawks to keep them from killing his chickens or after they'd already done it. I said, "Doc, make it so hawks can't get your chickens. Don't shoot hawks. Why do you have sex-link chickens out here anyway? They're totally insensitive to predatory birds. Fence them so hawks can't get them, or change the kind of chickens, or both."

"Why are a few hawks so important?"

"Because somebody has to care. Somebody has to make a difference in the way we approach wildlife. Leave the predators alone. Change what you're doing so they aren't a problem to you."

"Any predators?"

"Any predators."

"How come you think you can tell me that?"

"You need telling. You know it's the truth. You read enough. You talk the language. You speak fairly intelligent conversations. Act out your intelligence."

"Can you shoot?"

"Yes."

"Let's see what you can do with a few rounds through my forty-five."

"We'll have to go by the house for ear protectors."

We did. I told Laura and Juniper and Amanda, "We're going to do some shooting down behind the phone house," so

they wouldn't be alarmed by the shots. We blacked the center of several pieces of cardboard and anchored them with stones on the far bank of an irrigation ditch.

I said, "How far?"

"Well, let's try a hundred feet." We paced about a hundred feet, and Doc said, "If we go another ten feet, we can use that big fence post for a rest."

I braced my hand against the post, rested my right wrist on my left wrist, cocked the revolver, aimed, and fired, six times. Then I stood behind Doc while he fired six shots at a neighboring piece of cardboard. We walked the greening meadow and looked at the cardboard.

I said, "Looks like my pattern's about two inches tighter than yours."

"How about no rest, rapid fire?"

"Let's try it."

Twelve valley-rocking explosions later, my pattern grouped about two inches tighter than Doc's, and I did it again, standing, slow fire. I said, "I don't see how you can shoot that thing without using ear protectors."

"I'm used to it."

Maybe my shooting that day did the hawk population some good. I think Doc quit killing hawks. It wasn't long before his chickens were gone anyway, eaten by the family or by predators; I didn't pursue the details.

Doc and I Cut Wood and Learn Something New

Doc asked me, “How come I never feel like fighting you? Just about every other friend I ever had, I fought with him some time or more than once.”

“Because I don’t fight, and I never attack you personally. I’ll talk about what you do however I want to, but I won’t talk bad about you or treat you bad.”

“I guess I don’t understand the difference.”

“People tell me, ‘That Doc is a bad man.’ I always say, ‘No. He’s not bad. He just acts bad.’”

“Sometimes I do wonder why I’ve been in so many fights.”

“That’s easy to answer. Because you’re so ready to fight. Isn’t it obvious? Anyone who packs a forty-five everywhere he goes has a high consciousness of the propensity toward violence in other people. Wouldn’t that be safe to say?”

“Seems like it.”

“Awareness of the possibility of violence tends to stimulate violence. People respond to your expectations. I refuse to respond to your expectations of violence, so you’ve stopped expecting it of me. I don’t expect violence from you, regardless of what you say, do, or look like, so there’s nothing for you to respond to.”

The last of the snow melted, and the ground dried. Doc got his truck out, loaded the poles he’d unloaded, drove to town, and sold them. I told him to keep all the money. I had a check coming for ranch work, and I figured he’d earned the money from poles.

Doc drove his truck to town and had logging bunks welded on. He logged part of the Hale ranch. He hauled 16-

foot logs on his 12-foot log truck up over two steep summits, down into Prairie City, and sold them to the mill. He wanted me to work for him, but I irrigated meadow, fixed fences, gardened, taught my daughters math, wrote, and lived on and near the meadow in late spring and early summer. I told him I had enough to do without working for him. Doc hired Jim to set chokers and act as general handyman.

Doc invited me to ride with them to the mill in that old, overloaded truck that didn't have much muffler to the exhaust system. I said, "Thanks for the offer, but I'll pass. I can think of better things to do than endure that unbelievable noise. You guys are going to damage your hearing in that noisy machine."

"What'd you say about the steering? She steers okay. Just a little light in the front from the weight riding so far back. It's pretty good going downhill, but sometimes on a steep uphill, she feels like she's going to sit on her tail."

Some days, I drove up Hale valley and worked with Doc and Jim or sat in the shade under a tree and visited. Summer heated up. Dust stirred with any activity. Sharp red smell of forest clay, grey smell of dust from the gravel road, pine-pitch smell and the smell of crushed pine needles hung in summer sunshine.

After he logged most of the summer, Doc ran into more problems with his truck and the market for logs than he could overcome. He moved to western Oregon and got a job falling trees from steep mountainsides. Autumn, he wrote and said, "We cut the last sticks off the hills over here. I need to work, but I haven't found anything around here. Any possibility of cutting firewood over there?" I wrote back and said I had more orders than I could handle; weather permitting, we could make some money; come on over.

He left his family established there, came back, stayed in Guy's cabin, and partnered up with me cutting firewood. We made good money, and the orders kept coming in.

Doc and I drove across the meadow while it was still dark. We started cutting wood at daylight. The first truck showed within two hours, and two others drove across the meadow soon after. I showed the people where to load their trucks, and Doc and I cut wood.

Late morning, I saw they'd finished loading the first truck, and I walked over and talked to the driver. "Walk this ditch crossing with me down here." We walked down to the crossing over the big ditch, onto the meadow. I said, "Stay in the tracks through the grass right here. Don't put a wheel this far over, because it's undercut. See the way the water washed back under here? If you get too far over, the bank'll collapse."

He paid me for the wood. I walked back to my work area. Doc took his saw into the shade and filed the chain. I joined him and worked on my saw. I looked up just as the red truck broke bank away and fell onto its side with a tremendous crash. Firewood avalanched out of the back, down into the deep ditch.

"Son of a bitch."

We ran down to the truck. The upper door opened, and the three men climbed out, one after another. Doc said, "You guys okay?"

"Yeah. We're fine."

The front wheel and the front corner of the racks supported the truck. The bed hung out over the deep ditch.

We looked it over. The driver and I walked back to where he had driven across. He said, "I was over about six feet too far. I just said to my brother, 'I hope I'm over far enough,'

when bam, down we went.”

“Scared me.”

Doc said, “I’ll drive up and get Gene Hale. He’ll know what to do.”

Gene brought his jeep, a four-pulley block and tackle, cable, and chain. He said, “Cut two stout lodgepoles about fifteen feet long. Not so big you can’t move ‘em.”

Doc and I carried our saws up the hill and cut two lodgepole pines. The rest of the crew helped us drag them down beside the truck. We wired the lodgepoles together a foot below their tops. We leaned the resulting triangle over the truck, ran a cable over the Y at the top, hooked it to the frame on the downside of the truck, and to the block and tackle at the other end, with the block and tackle anchored to Gene’s rig and Doc’s rig chained together.

We hooked the tractor to the cable coming out of the block and tackle and pulled. Everyone not in another strategic position stood on the tractor tow bar to increase traction. As we pulled the tilted triangle up toward vertical, it brought the truck up with it. The men who had been in the truck blocked under the rear wheels with logs and chunks of wood. Then they drove the truck onto level ground. The bed had broken loose from the frame, but with a combination of jacks and manpower, we got it into position. They wired it down with barbed wire, reloaded the wood, and drove across the meadow toward home.

Doc said, “What’d you get so shook up about? It all came out all right.”

“Well, I hate to admit it, but the first two thoughts that came to my mind were, God, I hope that’s not my fault, and, that’s going to cost us a lot of time that we could be cutting firewood.”

“Oh. I never even thought of that. It did use up the rest of the day.”

“I eased up when I realized I hadn’t directed him onto unsafe ground and he was accepting full responsibility for what happened.”

“Next time, you’d better walk them all the way across.”

“We aren’t going to use that crossing anymore. We’ll extend the road down this side to the next crossing. They can’t fall off that one.”

“Don’t bet on it. Some of the people who come out here could.”

Some of them. Most of the people got around fine, used their heads and knew their limits and the limits of their machinery. Some of them became memorable events.

The man was about 65. The woman looked to be about 30. The boy who came with them was about 13. The man yelled at me angrily as he stepped down from the truck cab, “You said you would be there to lead us out here. Your wife doesn’t make her directions very clear.”

I said, “You told me you’d be here yesterday. If I sat home waiting for you to arrive, I wouldn’t get any wood cut.”

He didn’t seem to hear me but kept speaking in anger.

Although Doc usually left dealing with customers entirely to me, he stayed close to assist these people in getting backed to the wood and getting started loading, despite the man’s anger. More than once, Doc had reminded me he was a grown man on his own according to the lights he saw, not in need of a father substitute or a kindly uncle to steer him through life, so I didn’t tell him what I knew.

I walked over and picked up my saw. When I straightened up, the woman stood beside the truck, looking into the outside rear view mirror and brushing her hair. Doc stood

twenty feet in front of her. She looked over the mirror at Doc as she brushed her hair.

When I fueled my saw for the third time, Doc climbed the hill to tell me they were ready to go. “Come down and settle up.”

I left my saw and walked down. They had stacked the truck full, so I said, “Three cords. Ninety dollars.”

“I only want two and a half cords.”

“You told me that before you started loading, and I showed you how much to leave without wood in it to make two and a half cords. You filled it clear up, and that makes three cords. Three cords is ninety dollars.”

“We agreed on seventy-five dollars.”

“For two and a half cords. Throw a half cord off, and it’s seventy-five dollars.”

“This is two and a half cords, the way it’s loaded.”

“Do you remember measuring it a couple of hours ago? I made these pencil marks on the sideboards right here, and you said you’d stop loading at these marks. It seemed agreeable to you at the time.”

He stood there looking angry.

Doc said, “Short bed like that, it might not make three cords. It isn’t worth fighting over half a cord.”

That settled the argument to the buyer’s satisfaction, so he paid me seventy-five dollars; I let go of my argument and gave him a receipt, resolving that the fifteen-dollar shortage would come out of Doc’s half.

The man, the woman, and the child got into the truck. I said, “Wait a minute. I have to get you straight coming across this low spot. If you get one wheel low, your load is so high, you could tip it over.” The man obviously heard what I said. I stepped down into the low spot, so I could direct him to back

up and square off so both front wheels came into the low spot at the same time and then both back wheels, so the truck stayed level side-to-side. He ignored my directions and drove forward, coming into the low spot at an angle, and the truck yawed to the side.

I yelled, “Hold on. Wait a minute,” but he ignored me and kept coming. When his right rear wheels dropped into the low spot, the truck tilted so severely, I was sure it would tip over, and I was right where it would fall. I was scared and angry and scrambling to get clear when the front wheels came up onto level ground and stopped the pitch to the side. The truck came forward three more feet; the left rear wheels touched the ground again, and they drove across the meadow. It took me a few minutes to settle down enough to be able to talk.

Doc watched the truck roar across the meadow away from us. He said, “That guy is really strange.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know.”

“He didn’t say anything, but he looked like he might take an axe to me toward the last. Why would he get so angry about me making a little time with his daughter? I wasn’t trying to get her down on the ground or anything, just making friendly talk.”

“Because she isn’t his daughter. She’s his wife.”

“Well, why the hell didn’t someone say something? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You keep telling me not to give you any advice. You’re grown up. Figure out how to manage your own life.”

As I fueled up my saw and filed the chain, I looked up to check the progress of the truck across the meadow. I was ready to start cutting again when I saw the truck start up the hill toward the barn. “Doc, look at what that idiot is doing. He isn’t going around the barn. He’s going straight up

through the lower corral.”

“Maybe he’ll make it.”

“He won’t. There’s a spring in there, and the ground’s wet halfway up. Come on. Let’s get over there before he does something really stupid.”

We jumped in Doc’s rig and headed across the meadow. Doc poured the coal to it, and I held on to keep from bouncing into the roof as we slammed across ditches. “You’ll use any excuse to drive fast, won’t you, Doc?”

“You bet. Just hang on.”

The truck spun wheels on wet ground, but it didn’t sink. I got the tractor and pulled up behind the truck. The man was angry and telling about it. I said, “If you had put ten percent of the energy you’re putting into anger into listening to instructions, you would already be several miles down the road. The road out of here goes around the other side of the barn.”

“Your wife told us to go this way. This is the way we went on the way out. You’d better straighten your wife out on giving correct instructions.”

“Mister, you should congratulate me, because I haven’t yet lost my temper at you. I’ve been doing a good job of keeping my anger under control, but I’m at the edge, mainly because you insist on acting like a loud-mouthed idiot every step of the way. My wife has given the same instructions to a hundred other people, and every one of them has done it right. If you looked at the ground in front of you, you’d see there hasn’t been one vehicle across here, no tracks at all, while the road over there across the dry ground is as clear as the sun up there in the sky.”

Doc hooked the chain to the truck and then around the front frame of the tractor. I told the man, “Bring the truck

back easy. Don't let the wheels spin. As soon as the rear wheels come up over this hump, put the clutch in. When you feel the front wheels come up, stop. Don't forget I'm directly behind you, and I won't be able to get out of your way."

I'd just as well have talked to the bales of hay stacked in the barn, and I should have known that. I pulled him backward, and he poured on the power. His rear wheels hit another wet spot and spun, and the truck stopped, or he would have rammed into the tractor. I sat for a minute, remembering all the people who had come out, done everything right, been fine people to talk to and get along with.

I said, "Doc, get that guy out of the truck. Tell him to wait out of the truck, where I can't see him. You get in there and drive it and bring it back easy."

He did. We got the truck and the people on their way. We drove back across the meadow in Doc's rig, and we cut more firewood.

Thank You, Winter Weather

We had plenty of orders for firewood and plenty of dead trees to cut into firewood. Doc said his youngest brother, Jay, needed work. “He could bring my tractor. We have a four-wheel drive log truck, a small gas-engine job. He could bring that, and we could haul logs in and cut them up here.”

“I’m wary of using machinery, Doc. A lot of the income goes to support the machines, and less goes to wages for the workers.”

“It wouldn’t cost you anything for us to bring the machines over. We could bring them over, and if it works out to use them, then you could buy into the use of them if you want to.”

“If you want to put Jay to work, that’s okay with me. I guess bringing the machines or not is up to you. I’d advise against it, though. We can keep cutting wood where the customers can get to it to load it. There isn’t any reason to drag the trees around or load and haul them. It makes more work out of the job.”

Doc said, “When the weather gets too bad to get customers out there to get the wood, we could still cut trees, haul them to the corral and buck them into firewood. That way, we could keep selling wood all winter, when the prices go up.”

So Jay brought the truck and the tractor from western Oregon. Doc said, “They’ll be really handy once it starts snowing. You’ll see.”

They weren’t, but that wasn’t Doc’s fault nor the fault of the machines. It started snowing a week before Thanksgiving, but it stayed too warm to freeze our road across the meadow.

We got across the meadow in Doc's four-wheel-drive rig, and we got around our cutting area with the four-wheel-drive tractor, but the ground stayed too soft to haul wood across.

I liked being out there in slushy snow and cutting firewood for a while, but that began to change, because it became obvious the way we were doing it didn't make sense. But Doc and Jay needed the work and had the ambition, and I didn't want them to work out there without me. Doc hated to pile limbs and tops, and he would avoid it any way he could. If I didn't keep calling his attention to it, he would let clean-up work slide, meaning to do it tomorrow, and tomorrow might bring two feet of snow that buried the limbs and tops and left me clean-up work to face in the spring.

If I had to keep going out there to check on their work, I might as well work. Some cash income wouldn't do any outright damage to me or my family. I dropped trees and limbed them. Doc hooked the tractor to the logs, dragged them down, and piled them into a deck. Jay cut them into firewood lengths in the deck. I was firming up my wood cutting policy: "Never move a log if you can sell the cut-up wood where the tree falls." The policy wasn't rock hard yet. Doc is a persuasive talker, and I'm sympathetic, but working in a situation largely against my instincts and stated policy helped make me prone to carelessness. Several close scrapes reminded me.

A green lodgepole, about eighteen inches through, leaned sharply over our road. Because of its lean, it would throw its roots and fall or break and come down some time, so I decided to drop it and give us safe passage by it.

I cut the notch in the front of the tree and started the cut from the back. My saw sputtered and spit and lost power. I pulled it from the cut, turned it on its side across my knee,

and adjusted the carburetor. I heard a loud, cracking sound. Did I mention I lost the hearing in one ear, and I can't tell where sounds come from? I looked up the hill to see if Doc's work made the sound. It didn't. I turned and looked at Jay just as the butt of the tree I'd been cutting went by at high speed, inches from my face. Tired of waiting for me to get my saw running, the tree barber chaired, split from the cut to thirty feet up and threw the split butt of the tree back. If I hadn't stepped to the side and turned to look at Jay, I would have caught it about chin high, and it would have been the end of me. I know about barber chairs. I know never trust a partially cut tree. I just didn't have my brain in gear. I think it was hard to keep my brain in gear when I was sure the work we were doing wasn't sensible, and I only stuck with it so Doc and Jay could work.

Two days later, I dropped a dead tree, and the top crashed down onto the deck Jay was working on, about eight feet from him. Somehow, I cut that tree without thinking about where it would fall. I had never done that before. I never did it again. Jay looked across the hill at me. I looked at him. I was already saying everything to myself that needed to be said. I guess he knew that, because he just went back to bucking logs into firewood lengths.

Jay also thought the project was senseless. Only Doc's driving ambition carried the crew along. We cut six cords of wood in five days. That was thin going for a crew of three, but Doc couldn't be slowed down by reason. He said, "When the ground freezes hard, we'll be able to bring customers over here to get the wood, and then we'll be in good shape."

But the ground didn't freeze hard. It got so sloppy, with the temperature rarely dropping even to 32 degrees, that we could no longer get across the meadow to work. Doc would

have tried it. He would have been happy to four wheel through slushy snow until he sank to his axles in the mud underneath. He would have apologized for the holes and the mess created by getting stuck and getting out, and his apology and a good shovel would have been all I had to deal with the mess in the spring.

Doc and Jay stayed in the cabin across the road from our house. I said they'd be welcome to eat with us if they'd participate in the work involved in preparing meals and cleaning up afterward. Doc said, "Wash dishes? Not me. I don't wash dishes."

Jay agreed.

I said, "Don't you ever wash dishes?"

Jay said, "Peggy and me talked about that stuff before we got married. She said, 'Jay, I don't know if I can do all that all the time, get up and build the fire every morning and do all the cooking and all the dishwashing.' so I said, 'Well, I guess we can't get married then,' so she decided she could do it."

So they cooked for themselves on the woodstove in Guy's cabin. They cooked everything in the frying pan, ate out of the pan, and never washed it. Doc drank a lot of coffee. He had a big coffee-pot, and he never washed that, either. I walked across the road early in the morning to say the thermometer still didn't drop below 32 degrees all night, and he gave me a cup of coffee. I commented on something that floated to the surface in my cup. Doc looked at it. "I don't know what it is either. It's been boiled. It won't hurt you, whatever it is."

Kathy, Doc's wife, left Jamie with her mother and came over from western Oregon. She helped with the cooking and dishwashing, so we all ate together. Kathy is a lovely woman,

kind, thoughtful of others, a hard worker, and a good cook, but she couldn't stop talking. Even when she ate, she kept a non-stop monologue going. It didn't matter if anyone listened or not. She still talked.

Doc said soon after they married he came in, sat down in his chair in the corner, and said, "Fix me a pot of coffee, Kathy."

She dropped to her knees in front of him. "Yes, master. Coffee. Anything else, master, cake, pie, your boots pulled off for you, master?"

He hit her. "I guess I didn't have to hit her as hard as I did, but when I hit, I hit. I don't stop to think if it needs to be hard or not."

"And what was her reaction, Doc?"

"It knocked her flat on the floor, but when she got up, she went in the kitchen and fixed me a pot of coffee."

"Did she always talk as much as she does now?"

"No. When we first got together, she didn't"

"Did it ever occur to you you might be the cause of her being so nervous she talks all the time? You knocked her down on the floor. You're still none too gentle with her. You ride roughshod over her in conversation, never give her a chance to say what she needs to say, never pay any attention to what she says she needs from you in terms of money or help with what she has to do or cooperation on basic needs."

"That's the only time I ever hit her."

"Once was enough."

"Even if I caused it, it still isn't my fault. I'm remembering now I needed to get the hell away from home because she never shuts up. I was glad to see her the first day she got here, especially the first night, but I've been telling her she's going to have to shut up or go back home, and if she

can't learn to shut up, we aren't going to be married much longer."

"Did telling her that shut her up?"

"No, it didn't. She's talking more than ever."

"I always thought of you as an intelligent person, Doc. Now I wonder about that. Either you aren't as intelligent as I thought, or you have a big stupid spot when it comes to seeing what's happening with Kathy."

"Maybe so. I still can't stand to be with her very long at a time unless she learns to shut up."

Kathy went home before Christmas. It didn't get cold enough to cut wood and get it across the meadow. Doc and Jay packed up and headed back over the mountains to western Oregon a few days after Christmas. Two days after they left, the temperature dropped. Clouds piled up overhead. Light, dry snow came down densely all day long, until a foot of new snow covered the old, crusted snow. Clouds cleared off at dusk. The temperature headed down, and it didn't stop until it hit twenty degrees below zero. I was glad it had waited. I liked having the place to ourselves. I settled into the things I do in winter that don't involve fighting the weather.

I wrote stories, taught Juniper and Amanda, participated more in the family's reading aloud to each other, played my guitar, and skied on the meadow.

I wrote until past midnight and then decided to take a walk. The big county plow had cleared the snow from the gravel road. There wasn't any traffic at night. The thermometer said thirty below zero, too cold to walk, but I did it anyway, with two scarves, two hats, double mittens, long underwear, and insulated coveralls.

Half a moon hung high in the sky and lighted up the night. Moonlight reflected from the snow. The night seemed almost

as light as daylight up close, but objects at any distance became mysterious. The shadows were very dark. That could have been a dragon moving at the edge of the timber, across the lower Camp Creek meadow from me, but perhaps it was just dark shadows and some small motion in my peripheral vision I wasn't consciously aware of, like an owl flying tree to tree, translating itself to mythic motion on the cold mystery of the moon-bright night.

Coyotes howl across the river and meadow from me. I think they're up by the aspen spring. One of the coyotes sounds as if it practiced *Hound of the Baskervilles* howls until it achieved permanent hoarseness. That one lets all the other, higher-pitched, more silvery-voiced coyotes start their song and build to a good and rising rhythm, and then it joins to pull the song up to a dramatic crescendo. It is one of the coyotes who came close to the house and howled the night our dog lay sick in the back room.

A long ways away, an owl speaks of the cold night. My rubber-soled feet come down quietly on the frozen road. A small breeze blows into my face, makes noise against my ears, and blows cold through my clothing. Close to the river, I hear the sound of water, muted by its surface of ice. I walk briskly. If I slow down, I begin to feel cold.

At the bridge, I stand in the deeply shadowed beginning of the canyon and listen to the river and the night. Then I turn around and head toward home. With the breeze at my back, I don't feel as cold, and I slow down. Once more, the coyotes work up a good howl over in the timber. Silence soaks up the last reverberations of their song, and I yell, "Hey, thanks for the serenade, you coyotes, Beautiful singing. Really fine."

"Yap. Yap yap yap." Might have been one coyote. Maybe two. Hard to tell.

I walk beneath a clear sky. Half a moon hangs halfway up
the sky. Stars shine brightly above the mountains.

Jim Joins Us and Flies a Tractor

His eighteenth summer, Jim worked for Gene Hale. He stayed at the Hale ranch, up Hale Valley, north of the Rouse Brother's ranch, all week. Weekends, he rode his motorcycle home to Hereford, where he lived with his mother and his younger brother. We knew him just to wave at as he rode by in a cloud of dust and flying gravel.

Early that summer, Jim and Gene brought a big, light tan simmental bull down from Gene's place. I saw them way up the county road the other side of the highway. Second-growth pine grew by the gravel road on their right. Barbed-wire fence ran close to the other side of the road, bounding the meadow along Camp Creek. The bull ranged out front, and two men behind him on horses worked hard to keep him moving.

One man, lean and tall, uses a bull-whip. The bull comes fifty feet and then turns back. The men on horses block his path. The bull paws dust and gravel, snorts, growls, bellows, lowers his head, and charges, more than 2,000 pounds of angry muscle and bone, with sharp horns. The man cracks the bull on the nose with the whip. His horse dances sideways. The bull stops, and the tall, lean man reaches out with twenty feet of braided whip and cracks him on the nose again. The bull bellows and turns. The man cracks him on the ribs, and the bull trots down the road.

Horses lather in the hot sun. The bull balks. The man cracks him on the butt with the tip of the whip. The bull isn't much impressed and starts to turn. The whip snakes out through summer air. The man sending it bullward pulls his arm back, and the point of the whip pops the bull on his

testicles. The bull leaps, runs fifty feet, then turns back, and the dance begins again.

At the corral, the bull turns and won't go through the gate. Both men urge their horses toward him. The bull drops his head and charges. Horses dance clear of the charging bull. The tall man snaps the whip across the bull's nose. Blood flies into sunshine. The bull turns. The tall, lean man pops the bull whip along the bull's ribs and flank. The bull turns and trots through the gate into the corral. Gene dismounts and shuts the corral gate.

I recognize the tall, lean, dark man as Jim when he takes his hat off, climbs down from the saddle, washes his face, arms, and neck in the ditch running in front of the corral and then lies down and drinks. I think of telling him not to drink that water, because it comes more than two miles down the meadow, and cows graze all along it, but it's too late. I know he knows the country better than I do, so I leave it that he's responsible for himself and can pick his watering holes however he wants to pick them.

I walk toward the corral. Jim gets up and walks to meet me. He asks, "Can we put that bull in there till Schroeders can get here to pick him up?"

"Sure."

"He jumps the fence from Forest Service range into Gene's pasture with his cows. He don't want him in there, but he can't keep him out. They'll bring a truck up and take him to sell."

"Why would he prefer Gene's cows to his own herd?"

"Hell, I don't know. Sometimes bulls get crazy. You can only keep a bull until he gets wise to the way things work, and then you have to sell him for hamburger. He fights Gene's bulls. He pushed one a half-mile down the fence. We

got him up against Gene's corral day before yesterday and tied his horns to a post this big around. He pulled the post out of the ground. It come over on him and broke the rope, and he was gone again. We put him back where he belongs three times, but it don't do no good. Don't get in the corral with him. He'll take you. This son of a bitch jumps four-foot fences and don't even touch the top wire."

I told Laura and Juniper and Amanda to stay away from the corral. The corral was sixty years old and rickety. If he had a reason to, the bull could come right through it, but I didn't believe Jim about jumping a four foot fence. The bull weighed more than a ton, and I knew he couldn't get that much weight four feet off the ground. But I walked over to look at him about an hour later, and the bull had jumped out of the big corral, four and a half feet high. The next gate stood open, but then he cleared two four-foot barbed-wire fences and pushed Gene's bull down the fence again before I knew he was gone.

Jim finished working for Gene Hale, and he worked for Doc, logging the Hale ranch. The next year, Jim worked for the Rouses on their home ranch, down the river between Unity and Hereford. He hired on as a ranch-hand and rider. A rider rides a horse all day, checks on cows, moves cows out of a streambed or from eaten-down grass to better grass and checks and fixes fences.

In the spring of my third year on the ranch, I cut all the blown-down lodgepole I could, trying to get the fence between Forest Service grazing allotment and the ranch cleared so I could fix it and keep cattle from leaking through down onto hay ground. I saw it was going to take me longer than I had, so I asked for help. John and Mike sent Jim up. Jim slept in the hunting cabin and ate his meals with us. He

and I cut dead trees and repaired fence every day.

Jim wanted to learn how to use a chain saw, so we went over the safety rules, and I showed him what the rules meant with the saw in action. Then he took the saw and cut fallen trees off the fence and the road along the fence. I stopped him sometimes and showed him something he needed to correct.

He asked, “You think I know enough to start learning how to fall trees?”

I said, “I think so. You stick close while I explain what I’m doing. I’ll fall a few, and then we’ll see what you can do.”

I explained what to do, and I dropped three trees to show him what I meant. I limbed them, shut the saw off, and threw the bucked-up tree tops onto the pile of limbs Jim was building behind me. The next dead lodgepole, about twenty-six inches through, stood eight feet from the fence. I said, “We need to drop this one parallel to the fence, right down this open path. Best way to do it, don’t even touch the fence with a limb. How would you do it?”

“I’d cut me a face notch right here, facin’ down the trail. Then I’d cut straight through from behind. She’ll tip without using any wedges, cause she leans just a little, right into the trail.”

“That’s just right. Let’s see you do it.”

I backed off and watched. He cut his face notch, kicked the loose wedge of cut wood out of the way, walked around, and started his cut from the back. His saw roared against the clear mountain day. The tree tipped and came down, crunch, and smashed the fence flat. Jim said, “What the hell happened?”

I walked over and pointed at the stump. “You let your saw drift off the straight line you planned for the back cut. The

tree started to tip. The thinnest side of the hinge, here, broke. The thick side hung on longer so the tree turned this far. Then the rest of the hinge broke, and it fell straight down from here.”

“Straight down on the fence.”

“It does look like that.”

“What’s the penalty?”

“Penalty is, we have to fix the fence.”

“Boy, that sure was stupid.”

“I don’t call it stupid. That wasn’t bad for the first tree you ever dropped, only about eight feet off target.”

Jim didn’t finish high school. He didn’t lack intelligence or ability. He was a casualty of teachers with narrow vision. He told me one of his teachers got mad at him when he couldn’t answer a question, and Jim asked him, “You know how to ride a horse?”

The teacher said he rode a horse once, but Jim said, “He didn’t understand what I meant. He knew things I didn’t know, but I knew things he didn’t know, and what I knew was worth as much as what he knew, more, if you needed to be up on a horse or climb a cliff or figure out where owls stayed in the daytime or work with cattle or fix a fence.”

I knew from what he told me Jim didn’t make much effort to be easy for his teachers to deal with, so his association with school and teachers dissolved early, to the satisfaction of all concerned. Jim had a monkey on his back, called, “I ain’t very smart. I don’t know much.” A stepfather who didn’t know much about raising children with love and respect reinforced that idea

I refused to accept the idea that Jim wasn’t smart. “You’re as smart as anyone I know. Your education is just different from what many people get. You can do pretty much

whatever you want to do.”

That set us up right. I expected him to learn whatever he wanted to learn, and I refused to hear any pleas that he wasn't smart enough or didn't know enough. He dropped that kind of talk and got on with the work. He was a quick learner, good at anything he set his mind to.

We left ready fence behind us every day. We went to work at daylight so we could quit early enough to go swimming or look around the country.

In our rambling around the country, we usually took Laura, Juniper, and Amanda with us. We all loved Jim as if he belonged to the family. Amanda and Juniper didn't have contact with many other children, so adults who would accept them as equals and give them the attention and respect friends deserve were very important to them, and to Laura and me.

We drove, usually in Jim's pickup, because he had four-wheel-drive, to Earmuff Spring, Pogue Point Lookout, Trout Creek Reservoir, Cottonwood Spring, places and swimming holes that didn't have names.

Jim had been over most of this country at least once, helping one cowboy and another ride allotment and helping build and repair fence. He knew the interesting places to go, and he never tired of going and showing us the country.

Whatever we had to eat, Jim ate it with enthusiasm. When I said, “I always take a quart of goat's-milk yogurt and some fruit for my lunch. You think you could stomach that?” he tasted the yogurt and said, “Boy, that is good. You bet. I could eat that any time.”

We liked cleaning up dead wood. Neither of us liked repairing barbed-wire fence much, but we stuck with the job, and we laughed at the day's work.

Jim's pliers slipped off the wire he pulled on, and he caught his own fists full in the stomach. The hard blow knocked the wind out of him, and it made him mad. He fought to suck air into his lungs. Then he turned and slammed the tractor tire with the pliers, which bounced back and smacked him in the face. He swore and started to swing at the tire again, but he stopped and didn't hit it. He looked at me and laughed. He laughed harder and harder.

Watching him laughing got me started up there in the timber beside the barbed wire fence, with dead lodgepole cut into pieces on the ground all around us, with forest growing toward the blue sky. We laughed, looked at each other, laughed harder, looked away and tried to stop, then looked back and laughed even harder, until we both laughed completely out of control, until we laughed ourselves out of air, and finally, after a while, out of laughter.

We got our breath back and smeared dust and tears around our faces. Jim said, "Well, that finished my energy for today. What do you say we go in and swap this tractor and wagon for my pickup and go up to Trout Creek Reservoir for a swim?"

"Sounds good. I can't look another piece of barbed wire in the face today."

Laura and the girls had gone to town, so Jim and I drove to the reservoir, a rough ride down the side of a steep ridge, through sagebrush, juniper trees and some areas of second and third-growth ponderosa pine, to the meadow along Trout Creek, then around a rock ridge above the dirt dam and as close to the reservoir as we could drive. We walked the last hundred and fifty yards, shucked our clothes, and hit the clear, cold water. I swam through the weeds and into open water as quickly as I could. I didn't like the feel of the weeds,

and I didn't like being unable to see down into the water under me. Jim just swam wherever he wanted to swim.

Four mallard ducks dabbled in the weeds along the shore, across the water from us. We stood on the red clay dam and looked down the long, narrow valley below us. Both sides of Trout Creek Valley, ridges rose sharply from lush green grass on the irrigated ground.

Jim said, "Bet there's a bunch of elk down there by dark tonight. Them geese down there by the creek like it real well too. They don't get bothered much back in here."

We swam again and dried off in sunshine again. Jim said, "We should have brought something to eat. My stomach's rubbin on my backbone."

"If we head out of here about now, we'd probably get some dinner at home."

We dressed and hiked up the steep, rocky trail to the pickup. We drove up the ridge to the highway just as Laura, Juniper, and Amanda drove down the highway on their way home. We followed them into the driveway. Jim carried groceries into the house while I started a hot fire in the cookstove. Laura cooked bacon for bacon, tomato, and lettuce sandwiches.

Jim, Juniper, Amanda, and I walked out the back door and picked lettuce for the sandwiches. We picked edible-pod peas and ate them. I pulled several green onions and munched them. Jim watched me and laughed. "You eat them things just like a goat."

"Sure. I've had lessons from Jewel. She's the best."

Amanda said, "Let me see what you were doing. I wasn't watching."

I picked parsley. "You just munch your way down the plant, no hands, like a goat. That's what lips are for."

We all ate vegetables like a goat and laughed in late afternoon sunshine until Laura opened the door and said, “What happened to my lettuce pickers? Everything’s ready but the lettuce.”

Jim said, “We been playing goats, but I think sandwiches sound like even more fun. Let’s take this stuff in, quick.”

Laura added cheese, popcorn, and apples, and we all feasted together. It heated up hotter than a military pistol in the house, with the cookstove going full fire, but we laughed about it, because we were hungry, eating a delicious meal, and a cool evening galloped toward us down the mountain.

We were always amazed by how much Jim could eat. It became obvious in the next few years that he hadn’t finished growing when he ate with us, so he had to fuel for growth as well as for the hard work we did.

Jim and I finished clearing and repairing the fence that ran through timber near the base of the west ridge. We started fixing fence at the foot of the east ridge, over by Whitney Spring. We built rock jacks about every hundred yards, to stabilize the fence. When we ran out of rocks to fill the wooden structures we nailed together, we drove the tractor, with the wagon behind it, down beside the fence, doubled back, drove along the top of the ridge and loaded rocks.

The third day up the fence, Jim said, “Why don’t we just drive straight up the hill for rocks? We’d cut off two miles of slow driving.”

“It’s too steep, Jim. People get killed when these wheel tractors tip over backward on them.”

“Naw. Up that swale there ain’t too steep. I’ve drove my mother’s wheel tractor up steeper slopes than that.”

I said, “Okay. If you’re confident, you drive it, and I’ll walk up.”

It would have gone all right, but the rear wheels spun in soft ground near the top, and he couldn't get any forward motion. I said, "If the wheels dig any deeper, it will come over backward. See if you can get it backed out and turned around. Once you get it headed down, you're okay. These things are easy to tip over backward or sideways, but they never tip over going downhill forward."

He steered and shifted and got the tractor and wagon turned around. He started down. He held the clutch in, and the tractor picked up speed really fast.

I yelled, "Let the clutch out," but the tractor was bouncing by then, and putting the brakes on or letting the clutch out neither one did any good. The tractor hit, bounced, slewed sideways, and hit and bounced in the other direction. Jim stood up, swung the steering wheel, and kept the tractor headed straight down. Chain saw, fence tools, posts, and wire flew off the wagon in every direction.

Halfway down the hill, Jim started his deep, loud Haw-Haw-Haw and kept it up all the way down. The ground smoothed out and leveled out, and the wheels stayed on the ground more. Jim got the tractor slowed down and then stopped and sat there a few feet from the fence, "Haw-Haw-Haw."

I leaped tools and posts and sagebrush and ran down the hill as fast as I could go. When I got there, Jim bent over the steering wheel, laughing hard. I asked him, "Have you gone clear nuts? Weren't you even scared?"

He wiped away tears and said, "I was. I was scared near out of my jeans. I was right at the top of one of them high bounces when what you said up there come into my mind just like you was saying it to me right then, 'These things never tip over going downhill forward.' Haw-Haw."

I never could see that guy laughing hard without getting caught up in it. We laughed so long and hard, we had no energy left for barbed-wire fence. We quit work for the day, picked up Laura, Amanda, and Juniper, and went swimming.

Every time we looked at each other the rest of the afternoon, we started to laugh, at the humor of our flying tractor event and with relief that tractors never do tip over going downhill forward.

Wapiti on the Meadow

We finished fixing fence. Jim went back down to the Rouse brothers' home ranch and rode grazing allotments. Then he cut hay down there, late summer. We needed to let the meadows in Whitney Valley dry, so we could harvest hay without getting machinery stuck. I took apart the dam I had built in the log-crib and let the water run down the river. I turned aside the ditch east of the river, so the water ran out on the ranch above the Rouse brothers' ranch, and I turned the water off the Camp Creek field, back into Camp Creek.

Canada geese have left the meadow. They leave when the goslings learn to fly, and we don't see them again until a few flights tour the valley briefly in the fall. The sandhill cranes stay here through the spring and summer and into the fall. I see them as I ride the motorcycle around the ranch and shut off irrigation water.

I'm up near the top of the ranch on the motorcycle. The cranes walk through tall grass between me and the west boundary fence. Several red-winged blackbirds fly close and peck at the cranes. The smaller birds outmaneuver the large birds, and all the cranes can do is leave the area. One of the cranes walks over to the edge of the timber, and the blackbirds let it go.

The constant attack from blackbirds apparently confuses the other crane. It walks one way and then another. I shut the motorcycle off. The crane walks purposefully toward me. Blackbirds dive close to its head. I keep expecting it to turn away, but it keeps coming. It walks to within twenty feet of me, and the blackbirds fly away from it. The other crane calls from over by the timber, and the crane approaching me turns

and walks over to it. A little later, both cranes fly across the meadow.

The next day, a hot day, I ride the motorcycle down to the mill field and divert the water from the buck pasture springs into a drainage above the road. Then I ride onto the mill field and park the bike above the spring that irrigates part of the field. I walk down the ditch and shovel out dirt dams that turn water onto the field. I work my way to the bottom of that ditch and dig through grass roots and mud to get the water to run into the drainage ditch better, so we don't have a big wet area to get stuck in when we cut hay.

I finish digging the sticky mud and look up. One of the cranes watches me from halfway across the field, about a hundred yards away. I jump across the drainage ditch and walk into the lower field to work on the ditches there. The crane doesn't like me walking toward it, so it walks down the field and diverges slightly from parallel to my line of travel. We walk far enough apart, it doesn't take to wing, but it does walk faster. I walk faster. Soon, I'm taking as long strides as I can and walking as fast as I can without running. The crane outpaces me. Its long legs carry it rapidly across a lot of ground. I've fallen into a crane-walk without thinking about it. I step forward. As I shift my weight onto my forward leg, I lean into the motion. As I move through the step and begin to bring my other leg forward, I swing my upper body back. I bob forward and backward in smooth, rhythmic motion as I walk.

Ah. I am a crane. This is a marvelous way to walk, totally involved with the stepping motion. I run out of field. The crane turns at the bottom of the field and walks directly away from me, toward Camp Creek.

When I stop, I'm more than fifty yards below where I

intended to stop, but I don't mind covering the distance twice. I want to thank the crane for this experience. I already felt good, this fine day. Now I'm glowing all over with pleasure at being alive and being where I am, doing what I'm doing. I shovel ditches until all the water runs into drainages instead of running onto the lower field.

Eight cinnamon teal ducks float on the mill pond. I'm far enough away, they don't fly but close enough that they're nervous and thinking maybe they will fly. Many phalaropes swim on the pond. I can get much closer to phalaropes than to ducks, especially to fledglings. They swim or walk about, with high-pitched peeps. They're really too trusting.

I return home. Everybody stays indoors, out of the hot sun. I walk out behind the house and work in the garden. Amanda comes out and pulls weeds with me. After about fifteen minutes, she says, "It's too hot for me."

I say. "It's just about too hot for me, too. I think I've done enough for today, and I think we should go see what's interesting to do indoors."

The sun drops toward the hills. The afternoon cools down.

Elk come down from the timber onto the west edge of the meadow most evenings. Just at dusk this evening, they come down, more of them than I've seen before. I count seventy before I give up numbers in favor of just watching. Some of the elk eat, and some of them gallop back and forth, leap, buck, and rear into the air. They eat clover along the edge of the meadow. In some places, they eat it down to bare dirt. That doesn't bother me. Let them eat it.

But the first year I worked here, I wanted to do the job right; I wanted to do what the bosses wanted me to do. John and Mike came up to see how it was going. The hay was about half grown, and everything was going pretty well.

John asked me, “Are the elk coming down onto the meadow?”

“Sometimes, a while before dark, they come down out of the timber. There were about fifty of them along the edge of the timber Tuesday evening.”

He shook his head. “If they keep coming down this early, they’re gonna eat a lot of hay before we get it cut.”

“Well, what do we do about it? Should I try to keep them off the hay ground?”

“Sure. Keep them out of there if you can. The Department of Fish and Wildlife will furnish carbide cannons to try to scare them off. They go off every once in a while and make a hell of a bang.”

Mike said, “They get used to them pretty fast. They come down and eat the clover all around them after a few days.”

John said, “They work better if you move them around and change the timing every day or two.”

I said, “Okay. If you get some, I’ll move them around.” Neither of them had much faith in the cannons. They left it to me to see if I could come up with some way to keep the elk off the hay ground.

Gene Hale ranched this country more than forty years. I thought he might have an idea about what would work. He did. “If you ride a horse out there and take your dog, keep him right by you, and just go slow and easy. They won’t spook off as quick from a horse. Get as close as you can. When they start to run, go after them for all you’re worth. Put the dog after them, and run them as far into the timber as you can go. Do that two or three times, and they won’t come back. Deer will; you can’t run them out and keep them out, but the elk won’t. Oh, sometimes a cow and calf will, or two or three, but the herd won’t come back.”

I told John and Mike what Gene had said, and I asked, “Can you bring me up a horse for a while?”

John said, “Well, we don’t have a horse to spare right now.”

Dawg was off his feet after tangling with a passing car, so I figured I’d see what I could do, just me and the motorcycle. Late afternoon, about sixty wapiti came down out of timber onto the west edge of the meadow. I started the motorcycle and took off. I rode around the barn and headed down onto the meadow, still nearly half a mile from the wapiti. They understood what I was up to and trotted back up the ridge into timber.

I cranked the motorcycle wide open, bounced across ditches and ground squirrel mounds, and roared into the timber, right up their trail. Half a mile up the ridge, dead trees had fallen across the trail. The machine won’t jump like wapiti; so I headed back down. I rode to the next trail into the timber and roared up that as far as I could go, about a mile. I shut off the motor and listened. I didn’t hear wapiti. I figured they were miles away and still on the run.

I started the motorcycle and rode back down the ridge, confident they wouldn’t come back for a while. The trail runs a ways just inside the timber, parallel to the edge of the meadow. By the time I approached the meadow, most of the light had gone from the day. At first, I thought my vision was fooling me, the way I imagine all sorts of things in dim light, but then I realized I was fooling myself. The elk really had returned to the meadow ahead of me.

I rode onto the meadow where one of the ditches branching from the big ditch coming down through the timber spreads water. The wet ground was slick. I gave the motorcycle more throttle, but that didn’t do anything but

break traction so the wheel spun without gaining speed. So I rode onto the meadow just fast enough to maintain my balance. The wapiti trotted across, less than a hundred feet in front of me, into the trees and out of sight in the dark shadow of the timber, except for two cows, who stood at the edge of the timber and watched me until I was within fifty feet of them. Then they followed the herd up the hill.

When I got back to the house and shut off the machine, I heard the elk whistling as they galloped up and down the meadow, charged each other, bucked and jumped, and then spread out in the heavy clover on the bench ground and ate.

After that first effort at keeping the wapiti off the meadow, I learned more about cattle, grazing allotments in national forest, and about wapiti, and my perspective changed.

Cattle eat the largest part of the available graze in the National Forest range land around us, where elk would eat if we could keep them off the meadow. Wapiti leave four-fifths or more of the meadow hay. There's plenty of hay to feed the cows through the winter after the wapiti take first pick, so why get greedy?

Elk are intelligent, highly social animals, with a sense of humor, a love of play, and considerable understanding of the changing environment where they live. I walk a disputed line between, on one side, over-romanticizing and anthropomorphizing the animals around me as I see intelligence, love of life, and reasoning ability in them, and, on the other side, falling in too readily with our scientific, rational culture's half-blind approach to other life forms.

We distrust intuitive perception, our own, and that shown by other forms of life. We have become insensitive to the endless subtleties of wildlife's existence and the

manifestation of intelligence in all the life around us.

I walk that disputed line well, informed of opinions both sides of me but tuned to and drawing conclusions from the life in front of me and around me. I've observed wapiti on the meadow playing together and eating together, and I've seen and heard them up in the timber as I repaired fence or cut and loaded wood.

I left my tools in the timber and came to work the next day and found hard hat, shovel, axes, and gas cans scattered by elk. I put a tarp over my materials and weighted the tarp heavily with firewood. Elk worked the tarp off and again scattered my tools and materials. I didn't know if they played, or if they attempted to tell me something. I did know that much of their activity is not concerned with basic survival.

I wonder what we might have discovered about elk, about ourselves, about life and intelligence, if we had not chosen to be predators of the prey animals, elk. I think we might walk harmoniously among all the wild species if we chose harmonious existence with them as our first priority.

I see a difference in intelligence between elk and deer and a difference in their understanding of their environment. Deer often are killed on the highway, but I've rarely heard of a wapiti being hit by a car. I watched a mother elk watching the highway while she was 200 feet from it, down in the willows. When it was safe, she and her calf trotted up and crossed. They climbed a hundred yards up the ridge before the next truck came roaring around the curve.

In a deer's mind, it is sheer, unfortunate coincidence that cars suddenly appear out of the woods and whiz by them or hit them and take their lives. But when I watched the mother wapiti watching the road, I knew she understood how it

works. The vehicles stay on the highway and safe intervals appear between them.

Jim and I Cut Hay from the Meadows

I've shut all the ditches off, but water flows down the ditch from the spring on the slope above the barn and into the garden. I didn't discover that small trickle of water until my third year of gardening, but now, I make good use of it. I placed a hose over the bank of the raised ditch and siphoned water into the carrots. I pull weeds from the pea patch until the carrots are soaked, and then I move the hose into the peas. The peas bear heavily, and we eat many of them right in the garden.

Just before dinner, Juniper and Amanda bring a colander out and we pick it full of edible-pod peas, carrots, lettuce, and spinach. Laura adds some of the spinach to her spaghetti sauce. We eat the rest of the vegetables raw.

Mid afternoon of the next day, Jim and Cody drive two swathers up the river road. John follows in his pickup and takes Cody back down to the home ranch with him. It worked well when Jim stayed in the valley and ate with us and we cut dead trees and fixed fence, so John said okay when I suggested Jim could come up, sleep at the cabin, eat with us, and the two of us could cut the hay.

Jim and I let the swathers sit quiet for a while. We stand in hot sunshine and talk and don't talk. Then Jim says, "Want to cut some hay?"

"Might as well."

"You lead. I'll follow."

I cut a twelve-foot wide swath down toward the mill, parallel to the ditch. I kept one eye on the grass being swept down into the header to try to see I didn't pick up anything a swather shouldn't pick up, and I left neatly-windrowed hay

behind me.

Jim cut into the grass behind me and followed me down, cutting the next twelve-foot wide swath and leaving neatly windrowed hay behind him. I turned across the bottom of the field and held the swather slow along the edge of wet ground, one wheel wet and one wheel dry. Both wheels wet could mean a stuck swather.

One eye on the grass going into the header. One eye on the right wheel. One eye on the left wheel. One eye on the pattern of colors ahead of me. The light, bright green changes to darker green at the edge of the wet area. If I keep my approach to it just right, I can make some speed even while searching.

I turn ninety degrees right and head up the field beside the next ditch. Cutting along a dry ditch is easier than searching for the edge of a wet area, so I pour the coal to it. Without looking, I know Jim cuts hay just far enough behind me to be safe, without much margin. I cut across the top through sparse hay and back to where we started. We leave two windrows of hay behind us. I leave that piece for Jim to finish. He runs the diesel swather, which cuts hay faster than the same model, with a gas motor, I'm using. Once I'm out of his way, he settles down and cuts hay.

Largely, the ground decides how fast the machine cuts. When the operator gets jolted around by rough ground, it's time to slow down, because the header bounces and misses hay a slower machine will cut. The smoother the ground, the faster the cut, though dense hay cut too fast will overload the machines until the headers take more hay than they can feed through the augers, and the augers or the conditioners plug. Clearing a plugged header or conditioner is not enjoyable work, so caution is called for.

By the time I cut once around the next two pieces of ground bounded by ditches and finish cutting the third piece, Jim has laid all the hay on the first piece down in neat windrows and started on the second. I lumber across the irrigation ditch back into the second piece and cut hay toward Jim. We meet in the middle.

I shut my machine off, climb up into Jim's, and he drives up the field to my pickup. We leave the swathers and head to the house for dinner. On the way up the road, Jim says, "Let me open some of the ground. It gets boring just cutting the centers."

"Oh, okay. I just thought you'd probably rather see my machine eat posts than yours."

"Well, let me open some where you don't think there's any posts."

The next day, we went out early, but grass still wet with dew wanted to choke up the machines, so we shut them down and walked around the old mill and looked it over. Jim said, "They put a lot of good work in this outfit."

"Yeah, they did."

"And a lot of good wood."

"Yeah."

The grass dried enough to cut by nine thirty. We cut for an hour and a half and put down a lot of hay. Clouds blew off the mountain and covered the valley. Rain spotted the windows, then streaked them. Lightning danced down into the forest along the western ridges, and heavy rain hit us. We drove the swathers back to the pickup and drove the pickup home.

Wind and rain blew Amanda and Juniper in from their summer, no-school, down by the river adventuring and Laura from her walk down the county road. We all ate lunch

together and talked about what we'd been doing, seeing, and thinking.

Amanda said she wanted to ride in one of the swathers while we cut hay. I said, "It's noisy, bumpy, dusty, and hot, but we'll take you for a ride whenever you want to go. About all those things are good for, besides cutting hay, is climbing up on top and looking around. The roofs are about twelve feet off the ground, so you can see quite a bit from up on top." When she looked at the machines up close and heard them run, she changed her mind. She never did go for a ride in either of them.

The storm blew over. The sun came out. Late afternoon, Jim and I drove back down to the sawmill field and cut hay for about two hours. We shut the machines down at dusk and met at the edge of the field in the quiet. Jim said, "It's a good thing these things don't have lights."

"I'll say."

"This was about the right length of a day to run one of these rough riders."

"Yeah. Four or five hours and go do something else is about right. But then we'd have a baler running right over us."

Early the next morning, frost whitened the garden. The sun rose above Cottonwood Butte. I walked down the road to the cabin where Jim slept. I went in the back door and banged on the walls and stomped my feet on my way in. Jim stirred a little and pulled the covers up over his head until his feet stuck out the bottom. I said, "There's elk on the meadow. Forty four of 'em."

"Any bulls?"

"How do you tell the bulls?"

"They got antlers on their heads. Kind of like little trees

branching up.”

“Oh. No. No bulls.”

“Let’s go shoot one anyway. A yearling would taste mighty good.”

“Let’s go get the swathers ready to run, come back and eat breakfast, then cut hay until dark.”

He lay back down and pulled the covers up over his head.

“That wouldn’t be any fun.”

“Beats working for a living.”

“What time is it?”

“Five forty-two.”

“What’s that?”

“Eighteen minutes till six. It’s this four dollar digital watch I got. I just read what it says, and it says to the minute, not like the old round face, where you see what quadrant the long hand’s in and name it.”

He threw the covers off and got up and dressed.

We finished cutting the sawmill field. I drove one swather up the road and across the river at the lower ford. Jim brought the pickup. We drove back, and he brought the other swather while I brought the pickup. The pickup has to come along because it carries all the tools, fuel, and replacement sickle bars.

10:12. I cut too close to the timber and jammed a big limb, hidden in the tall grass, in the auger. I shut down, climbed down with the wrench, and turned the header backward until it rolled the limb out. I raised the header and checked the sickle bar. Nothing broken.

Down by the river, Jim’s swather sat at an angle, like he’d dropped one wheel in a hole. I cut the rest of the way around the top and down the ditch to the river. Jim hooked the chain to his swather. I turned around and backed up. He hooked the

chain to my swather, climbed back into his, and we both poured on the power. His swather came up out of the hole. Then we worked together and cleared his header of dirt he'd picked up cutting the edge of the hole. We put in a sharp sickle-bar. The temperature climbed to about ninety-five degrees. We sweat and coated up with grass dust and dust from the powdery dirt we cleared from the header. I said, "Let's jump in the river before we start up."

"Jump in the river?" He stripped and dove off the bank, splash. I hit the water right behind him, washed the dust and grit off, swam up and down, sat on the bottom a minute, then up and out.

Jim said, "Jon, you're the best boss I ever had. Nobody ever said jump in the river, least not meaning I should actually take a swim."

"I'm not the boss."

"That's what John said. He said on this ranch you're the boss, so do what you tell me to do. You say jump in the river, I'll jump in the river."

"Okay, but I'm promoting you to equal boss with me. I generally refuse to do anyone else's thinking for them. Juniper and Amanda, to some degree, because I'm responsible for them, and they aren't grown up yet, but even there, generally sparse. They learn to think better if I don't try to do it for them."

I stood on the sandbar and dried myself with sunshine. When I picked up my clothes and started to dress, Jim walked up out of the river and started dressing. "How long till lunch?"

I picked up my trousers and dug my watch out of the pocket. "It's eleven o'clock. What time do you want to eat?"

"Whenever you say."

“Let’s cut hay till one and then eat.”

When we leaned against a tire, eating lunch in the shade of the swather, Jim said, “What happened to the band on that watch?”

“I took it off. It pulled the hair on my wrist. I like pocket watches better, but as far as I know, they don’t make these things in pocket watches. I bought this kind because they don’t cost much.”

“I wouldn’t own a damned watch.”

“I like to know what time it is.”

“I know when the sun comes up. I know when I’m hungry.”

The machines broke down. Small break downs and medium-sized break downs. Sections broke out of sickle bars. I jammed a post in the auger. I stopped and hooked a chain to the post, hooked the other end of the chain to Jim’s swather, and backed until the post pulled clear of the auger. I put the post up on the machine’s deck, carried it off the hay ground, and dumped it where we wouldn’t pick it up next year.

We tried several times to cut early, when the hay was too wet. Wet hay jammed the auger and wound around the rollers. I crawled under my swather, cut hay from the steel roller with a sharp knife, pulled hay out, and threw it behind me. Sweating, itching from rolling around in hay. I decided to quit swearing several years ago. Sometimes I forget that decision when I’m haying and things go wrong.

Jim and I help each other remember it’s all just there to do, no point in fighting it. The sun shines, and we aren’t closed up inside a factory. The air is relatively clean, and at noon, we jump in the river. When we finish for the day, we jump in the river again.

Many people would pay money to come up into this

country and live for a while, maybe participate in some of the work, just so they've had this kind of experience in their lives. Jim and I agree we'll start a business. We'll show vacationing people how to do the work. We'll collect tour payments from vacationers and wages from the boss. We also agree we're going to put together a book, *Ranch Hand's Cook and Joke Book*, recipes and jokes and some of the funny things that happen while we work. Someday.

The gas swather gives us problems. It acts like it runs out of fuel. Then it overheats. Two hours out of commission. Three hours out of commission. John sends up additive for the gas that he thinks might help. Jim and I grease the machines. I'm ready to fuel the gas machine, so Jim hands me the can of additive, and I punch it with the opener. The opener penetrates the metal top of the can, and the liquid in the can sprays, a thin, accurate stream, right into my eyes.

I can't see anything, but I hear Jim hit the ground, and he's back in four seconds with a jug of water. He pours water into my eyes and across my face. When he empties the first water jug, he gets another. I take it from him. "I'll do this part. Bring the pickup, and let's head for the river."

He brings the pickup, guides me into it, and gets us to the river in short time. I lie down on the sandbar, submerge my head, and open my eyes, facing into the current. When I come up for air the second time, I wipe the water from my face and look around.

Jim asks, "Can you see anything?"

"I can. I can. I see dancing elephants and hippotamuses in all the deep parts, and huge snakes sneaking through the grass, and all the plants and trees dance and bleed where they're cut."

"Good. Good. We're all right then, cause that's what I see

too.”

“Then we’d better take the time to shuck our clothes and go for a swim.” The river isn’t very deep, late in the summer, but it satisfies us. My eyes are fine, not even bloodshot or blurry, thanks to Jim’s quick reflexes with a water jug.

The gas additive doesn’t help the machine.

The next day, the air conditioner quits on the diesel machine. The fan runs, but it doesn’t cool the air. With glass windows on four sides, the cabs become solar ovens when that air conditioner isn’t working. We take turns. One runs the hot-box and the other takes the one with functioning air conditioning. Then we trade, but Jim has trouble with hay fever, and after a while in that machine with the door and the window open and hay dust boiling through, he’s so choked up, he almost can’t talk or breathe. We take a break, and he struggles to get breath drawn in. I say, “I’m going to run that machine until someone comes up and fixes the air conditioner.”

He draws a hard, noisy breath and wheezes, “Naw, you can’t do that.”

“Not too much sense dying from cutting hay, is there, Jim? There’s better stuff for a hero to die from.”

“I don’t like the idea of you taking that hot box all the time, but I guess you’re right.” His breathing eases in the air-conditioned cab.

Three days later, a mechanic finally gets there and fixes the air conditioner and the fuel system on the gas machine. We’re back in full-time business.

The baling crew shows up with a big truck and a little truck, a big tractor and the big baler it pulls, a little tractor and the rake it pulls. Two loaders to load the eight-foot by four-foot by four-foot bales that weigh about twelve hundred

pounds each. A house trailer they park up by the spring at the aspens, for a place to stay. Various other pieces of equipment. We watch the crew unload the machinery from across the river. Jim asks, “Are we far enough ahead?”

“I don’t think so. We’ll see how long it takes them to get to work and what they get done today. Last year, we were through the gate and up about that first point of timber when they showed up, and we never were far enough ahead of them. They kept having to wait for hay to dry before they could bail it.”

“I hate to hold up a crew. They make the same if they finish it in ten days or two weeks, don’t they?”

“Yeah. They get paid by the ton. Last year, whoever came up to help me cut hay always left by 4:30 or 5. At least we can beat that.”

I climbed up and started my machine, and Jim climbed up and started his, and we cut hay. Six o’clock, we shut down by the river, swam a while and then sat on the sandbar and ate cheese, bread, and apples.

Jim said, “I ain’t gonna feed cows another winter. I don’t even want to go back down and cut hay at the home ranch. You gonna cut wood this year?”

“Yes. I am. As soon as they haul the hay away and I get my ditches in shape for next year.”

“Any chance you’d want a partner?”

“Might.” The year before, I partnered with Doc and Jay. I didn’t want another experience like the one of trying to work in slushy snow, but I knew Jim was an entirely different woodcutter from Doc.

He asked me, “You think I learned enough about handling a saw along that fence to make a good wood-cutting partner?”

“I know you did. I’ve thought about suggesting partnering

cutting wood, but I didn't want to encourage you to quit your job. The job's dependable. Might be we could make some money cutting wood. Or it could happen the weather gets bad and we can't haul wood out across wet ground. Or the orders might not come in, or I might not have wood to cut. John wants more stumpage than I've been paying. I've been trying to buy Rico's deadwood and stalling on John's in case I can get Rico's. So cutting firewood's not dependable. That's why I haven't mentioned it."

"Well, now I've mentioned it, and I'm willing to take the risk. I'll quit pretty soon anyway, even if I don't have anything lined up. I'm ready to do something else. How much does John want?"

"I don't know. I've been paying three, but he wants more this year. I thought I could offer four and a half a cord, but I don't know if he'll go for it."

"Why don't you just pay him what he wants, and we'll have some wood to cut?"

"I'll talk to him and see what he says."

John said six and stuck with it. I figured we could make a good wage even if we paid six. Wood cost five to ten dollars a cord from the Forest Service. Forest Service regulations said no vehicles but the cutter's hauled off wood. I've done well cutting wood partly because my buyers load and haul their own wood, so while other woodcutters load, haul, and unload wood, I'm cutting more wood. I don't have to think about is anyone going to steal wood or mess up our work area while we're home for the night or for a day off, because I can see our road and our work area from the house. So I said, "Okay, six."

We cut hay, but it felt good to know we'd be working for ourselves, doing something we liked a lot better than cutting

hay, soon. Cutting hay on the lower end of the ranch, on the west side of the river, went smoothly. We looked back a lot, to see how far behind us the crew raked and baled hay. We didn't really want to try to be heroes and put in twelve and fourteen hours a day for twenty-five dollars a day, but we didn't want to hold back a crew of about six workers and all the machinery, and we wanted the job finished, so we put in some long days.

A long, steel shaft turns the reel that sweeps hay into the header. That steel shaft in Jim's machine ruined its support bearing, and the shaft and bearing had to come out. Jim dug into wrenches, bolts, nuts, grease, and dirt, and he worked and sweat in the hot sun. He never had decided to quit swearing, so he was handier for a lot of the mechanical work. He practiced the philosophy we were speaking and mostly putting into practice. Don't fight it. Find the fun in it. Later, he said while he was putting the repaired shaft back into his swather, with me off in the distance cutting hay, he saw the sandhill cranes with four tall fledglings. I never have seen the young before they were fully fledged and flying around the valley.

We drove back to the house for lunch most days. Inside, the house stayed cooler. Laura put together a better lunch for us there than we could carry with us. We caught up on Amanda's and Juniper's and Laura's latest adventures and shared ours with them.

We needed to sharpen sickle bars the morning we cut the west end of the ranch this side of the river. It was my turn, so I sharpened sickle bars on the wagon in front of the barn, and Jim took the motorcycle and rode on up the meadow to the swathers and started cutting hay. When I finished sharpening, I hooked the tractor to the wagon and drove up the meadow. I

put a sharp sickle bar in my machine and cut hay. When we headed home late afternoon, Jim started down with the tractor and wagon. I finished the piece I was cutting, transferred to the motorcycle, and caught up with him just as he drove into the area of longer grass among trees.

I rode up beside the wagon and saw my dog run ahead of the tractor, turn at full speed and knock down a red-tailed hawk that had just taken to wing. I yelled just before he hit the bird, and that was enough to make him pull his punch and veer away as the hawk hit the ground.

Jim and I got to the hawk at the same moment, and the dog stayed at a distance. It was a juvenile red-tailed. It spread its wings and opened its beak in threat. It tipped onto its back and extended its talons. I said, "Looks like it can't keep its balance."

"No, I think he does that to show us all his weapons at once."

"Might be hurt."

"I don't know. He won't try to fly while we're here. Taking off is when he's most vulnerable, and he knows that. You got a handkerchief? I gave him my handkerchief, and he dropped it over the hawk's head and picked the bird up. The hawk stood up straight, with a firm grip on Jim's leather-gloved hand. Jim said, "His balance is okay. I don't think he's hurt."

Jim ran his fingers lightly over the bird's wings, back, and legs. Then he removed the handkerchief and handed it back to me. The hawk and Jim looked into each other's eyes. Jim moved the hand the hawk stood on. The hawk flexed its neck so its head stayed in the same place. Jim moved his hand in the other direction, and the hawk let its body move with Jim's hand but kept its head in as close to the same place as

possible. Jim moved his hand up and down and side to side and around in circles, and always the hawk flexed so its head stayed in the same place. All through the strange-looking, dance-like motions, Jim and the hawk locked on each other's eyes.

Jim stopped all motion. He and the hawk looked at each other. Jim extended his arm full length. The hawk flew up, curved gracefully around two lodgepole trees, up the meadow and across the river, out of sight.

When we got home, we told Laura and Amanda and Juniper about the hawk. Jim told about the pet red-tailed hawk he had when he was younger. Amanda and Juniper listened to Jim intently, but they didn't express an interest in owning a hawk.

Ravens and hawks fly down into the stubble for free lunch. The swather doesn't differentiate between grass and voles or mice or ground squirrels, snakes, birds if they don't get out of the way, so it's easy living for ravens, hawks, owls, coyotes, anyone who likes chopped meat. Coyotes don't come as close to the swathers as ravens and hawks do. Sometimes we see a coyote along one edge of the field when we're on the other edge. If the swather stops, the coyote disappears into the willows, into tall grass.

There's no way in the world we can drive those rough-riding machines those long hours without some breaks. We take a few times during the day to get down and walk around, shut the machines down and let it be quieter for a while, jump in the river, sit and talk about some of the things we thought about while we cut hay.

Once, I thought what we talked about might end our friendship. Jim said, "There's one thing I'd change about this valley, if I could change anything."

“The highway?”

“Wasn’t hard to guess that, was it? I’d like to see this valley without a highway through it.”

“Me too. We could blow it up.”

“That’d be fun all right. But it wouldn’t last. They’d fix it.”

I said, “And we’d only be able to see what we could see from behind bars.”

“I’d like to go back a hundred years and spend some time in this valley.”

“Could be changes will eventually come about to make things better. It’s probably about a toss-up if mankind destroys everything or gets some sense and starts changing things for the better.”

“What changes would you like to see?”

“All the cattle out of the forests. All the barbed-wire fences gone.”

Jim said, “Naw, now that’s one change I don’t want to see. Why the hell would you want to see that?”

“National forest belongs to the people and the wild animals. The way it is now, ranchers lease it for range land at absurdly low prices, and the cattle spoil it. There isn’t anyplace in this country you can go and not find cattle. Take a hike into wild country, and you run into a herd of cattle. Cattle graze the grass to the ground, eat the wildflowers before they can make seed, stomp all the springs to seeps, shit in all the streams so the water isn’t safe to drink, stomp stream banks so they erode really bad. National forest should be for wild animals.”

“That would break a lot of ranchers.”

“Let it break them. Why should we support the ranchers? Taxes we pay go for managing the forests, so we’re paying

the ranchers to keep their businesses going. They could do their ranching on their own land, and if they could survive on that, fine. If they can't survive on that, let them do something else."

Jim said, "We'd better cut some of this damned hay," and he climbed up into his machine and took off.

We didn't discuss it again that day while we were working. That evening at dinner, Jim stayed quiet. After dinner, I said, "Jim, I didn't mean to make you mad. I was just talking about what I think about, the same way I do when we're talking about a lot of other things. I don't even know what it was that made you so mad."

"I don't want to hear any more of that bullshit about shutting down the ranches. That's what made me mad."

"I don't see why you get so mad about it. I didn't invent the system. I was just talking about dreams."

He walked out and walked down the road to the cabin.

The next day, when we shut the machines down and ate lunch, he said, "I guess why I got so mad was I knew there was a lot of truth in what you said. The cattle should come out of the forest, and the damned barbed wire fences are bad, and they should go, but ever since I was a kid about this tall, I've wanted a job riding allotments. If you take the cattle out of the forests, that's the end of riding jobs."

"Jim, if things ever do get straightened out and run the way they should run, it'll be a long time from now. There's movement in that direction, but not much."

"I couldn't get it out of my mind last night. I kept thinking about it and thinking about it, and I couldn't sleep. But what I finally saw, I asked myself, which animal, if the only ones left were in zoos, which one would I rather see in a zoo, elk, or cattle, and I had to say, cattle."

It took fourteen days to cut the hay. Sixteen breakdowns, minor and major. One thousand, six hundred and forty-eight cuss words. Too often, I forgot I had quit swearing, so Jim didn't build that total by himself. Seventeen times of pulling a swather out of a stuck spot. Sometimes the grass grows so dense, you can't see a hole until you've already dumped a wheel into it and can't get out without help.

Up on the Camp Creek field, along the edge of the willows, I pulled Jim's swather out of a hole. I said, "The last year Mike cut hay up here, this hole was the fourth one he dropped a wheel into in two hours. We hadn't been able to pull him out with the other swather, so we had the red tractor up here. I pulled him out of this hole, and then I said, 'Mike, maybe we'd better just leave the tractor hooked up to the swather while you cut hay.' He got a good laugh out of that."

"I miss old Mike," Jim said.

"Yeah. I do too. He was a good man to work with, and he liked to laugh."

We finished cutting the last piece of ground, up by Gimlet Creek. We shut the swathers off. Jim said, "Nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

"Hot dog. But I'll just have to go to cutting hay down at Unity. I could quit right now and go to cutting firewood, cause I sure don't like cutting hay, but I can't leave John sittin high and dry. But I don't plan to stay down there too long either. Just as long as I can stand it, and that's all. Then I'm gonna come up and cut wood."

"Okay. I have quite a bit of ditchwork to do, but you don't have to wait for me. Go to work whenever you want to. You've passed all the safety tests. As long as you take the time to think about what you're doing, you're not going to get hurt."

We drove the swathers down the river to the home ranch and got a pickup, and Jim brought me back. We gathered the rest of the haying tools, and Jim took everything down the river road. “See ya in a while.”

“See Ya.”

The Treasure We Find

Early autumn, I took time off the Rouse brothers' payroll and cut and sold firewood along the fence and the ditch. Heavy clouds darkened the valley some days, and wind blew. Two afternoons, powerful wind blew across the ridge. I heard a tree crash to the ground up the hill from me, then another off to my left. I abandoned wood cutting and got out of the area.

Rain poured into Whitney Valley parts of two days. Then the sun shone and dried everything.

Mom came out from Sumpter. Often through the summer, we'd talked about prospecting for gold on the ridge west of Whitney Valley. If we didn't do it soon, winter would put it off for another year. We loaded gold pans, sluice box, pump, pick, shovel, and lunch into the pickup, drove south, and turned up the road cut into the ridge rising above the valley.

Elk galloped out of our way into the timber above the dirt road we drove. We parked above a drainage where an unnamed spring showed on Mom's map.

We hiked down the steep hillside and put our equipment in place below the small spring. I shoveled mud and gravel into the big gold pan. I moved a rock to a good spot beside the water flowing down the slope. Mom sat on the rock and dipped the pan into the water, sluiced gravel over the side, and worked the material down. She dipped the pan into the water again and worked it down more and sluiced gravel over the side again, a slow, repetitive process, until about a half-cup of fine black sand remained in the bottom of the pan.

She leveled the pan and swirled the water around and around, carefully spreading the black sand and leaving the

heaviest part in place. I watched from beside her. If we could create gold by wanting it, we would have small nuggets all through the black sand. We haven't concentrated hard enough. We see nothing at all, not even tiny gold "colors" in the sand. She says, "There could be color too small to see."

"Pour it into the jar, and we'll take it to an assayer. I'll dig down a ways and dam up the water, and we'll see what happens if we wash a yard or so through the sluice box."

The little pump, with its two-cycle motor, makes a lot of noise, but damming the water and pumping it is the only way we can get enough volume and force of water to wash the material through the sluice box. When we've nearly drained the pond and washed all the dirt and gravel through, we take the box apart and wash the trapped material into the smaller gold pan. I work the material down and spread it out in the pan. A long, thin, clinker stays at the tail end of the black sand I spread out. I pick it up and hold it out for Mom to look at. "What is it?"

She takes it from me and studies it. "I don't know. It could be silver. It might be platinum. We'd have to take it to somebody who knows more than I do."

"I don't see any gold in this pan, either. There should be gold here. There's gold everywhere else in this country, north slope, west slope, south slope. As far as I've been able to find out, nobody ever worked any of this east slope."

"Maybe that's why they never worked it. Maybe there isn't any gold up here. But I don't know how they'd know without prospecting deep. Most of the gold in this country is deep."

There's gold in the valley below us. Before World War 2, the Rouse brothers agreed to sell the upper ranch along the river to an outfit that wanted to come in and dredge it. They

dredged above the ranch, where the river comes out of steep slope and slows across the valley. Then the war started, and most mining shut down as workers went to war, and the deal to sell the land was never completed. It would have looked like some of the land over by Sumpter, piles of stone and gravel, most of the soil washed down the stream.

While we cleaned the sluice box out and panned down the material, the pond filled again. We ran more dirt and gravel through the sluice and worked down the material trapped in the box. Still nothing we can see.

Mom said, "If there is gold too fine to see, it wouldn't be worth working unless we had a lot of equipment."

"I wouldn't want to work it that way."

"Just as well. We don't have a lot of equipment."

We sit on the side of the ridge and eat lunch. Sheltered by the steep ridge above us from the cold wind rising in the afternoon, we enjoy the sunshine. We dream together of the ranch we would buy if we found a lot of gold, with houses or places to build houses so all the family could come and live. We would have individual houses, but everyone would farm together, handcraft things to sell, and share a big garden and greenhouses. It's a good dream. It's lasted us through thirty years of prospecting without wearing out.

I have a milder daydream, in case we only find a little bit of gold, of staking a claim and having a place to put in a good day's work and take out a good day's pay, approaching affluence, willing to work for it, independent in our work. Mom can do the lighter work, wash out the sluice box and work the material down, take the gold to town and sell it and bring back supplies. Amanda and Juniper can work as they want to, shovel gravel, feed the sluice box, regulate the flow of water. They can combine looking for placer gold with their

continuing education and work until they're ready to leave the mountains and venture into the world on their own. They can trade gold nuggets for what they need.

I'll even accept reality, ten cents worth of silver, this day, sunshine, a leisurely lunch on the ridge, winter walking slowly toward us, Mom and I dreaming together, doing something we enjoy doing together.

Fire on Bald Ridge

Clouds blew down from the mountain at midnight. Lightning lighted up the night. Thunder shook the house until I thought it might collapse. Lightning and thunder paused.

Juniper spoke from the next room. "That's close."

Amanda said, "There isn't any time to count between the lightning and the thunder."

Juniper asked, "Will it hit the house?"

I said, "No, it won't hit the house."

Lightning and thunder moved away from us, east. I wondered how many strikes started fires, but rain poured down, and we slept again. Wind, rain, and clouds blew away before daylight.

The valley smelled clean. Sunshine evaporated new water to mist above the meadow. Mist rose toward the clear sky and dissipated. The day heated up. I hooked the v-trencher to the tractor and rattled and roared down ditches, clearing weeds and dirt until noon. After lunch, I drove the pickup across the river and across the meadow and cut wood all afternoon. When the shadow of the ridge rising above where I worked reached halfway across the meadow, I loaded my tools and drove home.

I watered the garden and showered in the garden with water I'd left in canners to heat in the sunshine all day. I milked the goat just before dark.

Laura usually milks, but she's behind schedule, so I fill in. This goat I milk, Jewel, is a jewel. When the guy we bought her from brought her to us, she reared and struck at him with her hooves. He pulled her down and fought her out of the truck. He didn't maintain the upper hand by much. He panted

and puffed and said, “This goat doesn’t like men.”

That seemed true for a while after we got her. She got along well with Laura, but she reared at me and ducked her head as if she would butt me. She had no horns, but a hornless goat can deliver a powerful blow, so I stepped easy around her. I cut the twine from a bale of hay, stuffed a sheaf of hay into her feeder, and shut the feed-room door. I brought water, and I raked manure and spilled hay out of the stall where she stood to eat. She reared at me and struck with her front hooves, but she ended the striking motions almost two feet from me. I know little about goats, but enough about beings in general to be sure that, if she intended to hit me, she wouldn’t be striking air far short of me.

“Come on, Jewel. Cut it out. You know you want this good alfalfa hay and clean water, and you like things not to get too messy, so quit trying to run me out of here.”

She did quit, after a few days, though it took a few weeks before we were friendly enough that I’d have to say, “Come on, Jewel. Quit leaning on me. Give me room to work to get this place cleaned up. If you don’t give me some room, I’ll have to put you on the chain until I’m through.”

Her dislike of men, which continued even though she and I understood each other and got along well, probably came from some man’s misunderstanding of how to handle an animal. Jewel was intelligent and cooperative, but she would not tolerate physical force. If we showed her what we wanted her to do, and if it was a goatly sensible thing to do, she did it. But, if anyone tried to force her to do something, tried to bend her will to theirs, they’d have about a hundred and fifty pounds of fighting mad goat on their hands, with sharp hooves and a powerful head for butting.

I never even thought of trying to overpower her. I worked

with her and respected her, and that was easier on both of us. The exception came when her hooves grew too long. I reassured her all I could, and then I reached under her, caught her far legs, pulled them toward me, and pushed her down with my shoulder, while everyone else eased her descent to the ground. Laura and Juniper and Amanda held her down, pet her, talked, and sang to her while I cut overgrown material from her hooves. We finished and let her up, and she reared at me every time I got close for the rest of the day. I didn't push her territory or try to win anything, so she settled down.

I take the milk into the house and strain it, and Laura heats it for yogurt. Amanda Rose hums little tunes of her own design as she reads and waits for dinner. Juniper writes in a green notebook at the kitchen table.

I say, "What are you working on?"

"A novel."

"Is this a new one?"

"I've been working on it for about a week." She collates her typed text and the illustrations she draws and colors with colored pencils as she goes. She'll bind it with tape or string, whatever she decides works, when she finishes.

Our efforts toward education go very well. Amanda and Juniper aren't afraid to try any creative projects that come to their minds, and many possible projects do occur to them. They have no concept that their abilities are limited because they are young or lack experience. They focus sharply on their goals for education and creation and work with steady, powerful energy.

It didn't occur to me that I could create anything on my own until I matured. Through junior high school and high school, I rebelled against an educational system I knew didn't

work very well, but I didn't focus my energy toward anything positive in my own future. I lacked guidance toward any educational method that worked well. I lacked knowledge that education outside of the public school system was even possible. I lacked encouragement for flickers of creative fire that might have ignited me toward a focused future.

I knew public school often stifled me, but I didn't have the experience to generalize and see that school often stifled creativity until I escaped and looked back from the perspective of adulthood. My own creative fire, finally freed from the smothering influence of compulsive education, began to burn away irrelevancies I accumulated during the unguided process of my public school education.

Ideas about education and creativity filled my mind to overflowing and spilled out of me in strange new songs about living in a world that often tries to divert us from where we need to go.

I drove down to the Rouse brother's home ranch and drove the backhoe up to Whitney and dug weeds and dirt out of some of the big ditches where slow water allowed dirt to settle over the years.

I drove the dump truck up the long and curving dirt and gravel road. I loaded and hauled some of the dirt I dug out of ditches and dumped it where I would use it to reset culverts, to set new culverts, and to build dikes to get water across low ground onto parts of the meadow that hadn't been irrigated for years.

Dirt between the big double culverts near the top of the west side had washed out midsummer, making it difficult to dam the ditch and turn water onto the top of the ranch. I dug the culverts out, lifted them out of the way with the backhoe, packed the dirt beneath them with the backhoe and hand

tools, put the culverts back into place and covered them, packing the dirt as I filled around them.

I don't like operating the backhoe. It's loud. It's a body-jolting machine to operate. But if I don't make good use of the backhoe while I have it, I'll do some of this work with a hand shovel in the spring. In an hour, the backhoe digs what would take me three weeks with a shovel. I enjoy working with a hand shovel if the work is sensible and shows good results, but it wouldn't be sensible to try to move this much dirt with a shovel, so I run the backhoe three hours every morning early and take off and cut wood all afternoon.

The last rain thoroughly dried off, and another lightning storm flashed and rumbled down the mountain into the valley late one morning. The storm brought no rain. We spotted the fire on the ridge above us while we ate supper. I said, "I'd better go up there and take a look."

I put a shovel, a double-bitted axe, and a hazel hoe in the back of the pickup and drove down the road, crossed the river, and drove across the meadow and into the timber to where the road ended in washouts and down trees.

I left the truck and walked up the hill into dense lodgepole pine. Beetles had killed about eighty percent of the trees. About half the dead trees had fallen. I climbed over and under down trees until I walked out of the thicket into widely-spaced, second-growth ponderosa pine trees that gave way, higher up the ridge, to juniper trees and a few old-growth ponderosas.

At the top of the ridge, lightning had knocked two pieces of a large, dead ponderosa pine tree to the ground. The pieces on the ground burned in a clear area. The jagged, still-standing stump, about nine-feet tall, burned furiously. Black, pitch smoke boiled into the late afternoon air. The ridge

smelled of smoke and burning pitch. I thought burning material could roll downhill into highly flammable dead lodgepole. If a fire started in the down trees, there was fuel to carry it many miles. I dug a fire line to mineral earth below the fire. Then I sat down and watched the fire.

Two men from the Forest Service walked up the hill. The crew leader said, "It looks like you've pretty well taken care of it." The two men widened my fire-line and turned the burning pieces against the slope so they were less likely to roll.

High above us on the mountain, a storm gathered. The radio on the crew leader's belt crackled with lightning-caused static and spoke in many voices of more strikes and new fires.

The crew leader said, "I think it'll be all right. We're heading down the hill."

I said, "I think somebody needs to watch this fire. If the wind comes up, it could blow fire down into the dead lodgepole, and then we'd really have a fire."

Thunder rumbled down the mountain toward us. The crew leader said, "Two weeks ago, lightning struck within forty feet of me and knocked me a hundred feet down the mountain. This storm's going to be right on top of us soon, and I'm going to be out in the open in a rubber-tired pickup by the time it gets here."

"Okay. Since I'm the guy who thinks it needs watching, I'll stay and watch it. Would you stop by my place and tell my wife I'll probably be up here all night?"

They headed down the hill. The day's light faded. Thunder rolled down the mountain from the west. I put my tools close to the fire, so I could find them when it got dark. Wind started and kept increasing. I watched the lights of the

Forest Service pickup cross the meadow. Clouds deepened the new darkness. Wind increased. I walked around the fire. Sparks blew, and fire caught in a rotten log below the fire line. I broke the log up with my axe and threw the pieces into the fire above the fire line.

Lightning flashed around me, and thunder shook the ground. Lightning lighted up the ridge as bright as day. Lightning flashed so close together, all around me, I could see everything, tall, thick ponderosa pine trees up the ridge from me, bushier, shorter juniper trees here and there in open ground, dry grass, rocks in the soil, the valley below me.

Wind increased. Heavy rain poured into the wind and immediately soaked me. I covered my ears against the thunder, but it didn't make any difference. The sound penetrated me, shook and reverberated through my bones. I quit covering my ears. If my hearing would be further damaged, it was already done. I couldn't use up energy and concentration keeping my hands over my ears.

I stood partly out of the wind and hard rain behind the ponderosa pine that leaned almost over the burning stump. It had grown at about a twenty-degree angle from the ground. I wondered if its sharp lean made it more likely to uproot and fall in the savage wind. Maybe it grew that way because it had adapted to four-hundred years of wind blowing down the mountain. It was the tallest tree for some distance. Lightning could strike it. I was afraid. I was excited. Exultation filled me.

I thought of Coalpit Mountain, where I had soaked up the feeling of power and centered myself in brilliant light, changing colors, roaring thunder, rain and wind.

Now, I have a wife and children. When I danced in the storm on Coalpit Mountain, if I had become afraid, I could

have retreated to a lower, safer place. Now, I have to stay, because lightning all around me seems safer than going among dead trees in a high wind. Not necessarily safer, but if I'm going to die up here and I'm struck by lightning, I will probably die instantly, but if I'm crushed under a falling tree, dying could drag out for a long and lonely time.

At the moment of my greatest loss of confidence, I walk down the side of the ridge to a clear area and crouch. I read that this low position presents the least possible attraction to lightning, but I feel no power in the defensive posture. It's the wrong attitude. I can't bring myself to hold the abject position, to bow out of participation in this storm, to say that physical forces in a wild storm are more powerful than faith in Life.

I stand up and walk back up to the top of the ridge. I pray aloud into the storm. I receive a strong sense that I am held safe in the center of this storm. Fear leaves me. I stand between the leaning ponderosa, which blocks some of the wind and rain, and the burning stump of the snag. I soak up heat from the fire. Lightning flashes into the meadow and moves away to the east, across the valley and above Huckleberry mountain.

Neither the wind nor the rain abates. The leaning pine tree doesn't give me much shelter. Occasionally, I step out of its protection and walk up and down the ridge. I lean twenty degrees into the fierce wind to keep from being blown over. I have no watch. I have no idea how much time passes. Rain pours down so heavily, it puts out the fire, even in the very pitchy stump.

With the fire out, I have no reason to stay, but I still won't walk through dead lodgepole in the wind. I cultivate patience. I am cold, but not dangerously cold. I walk back and forth

along the ridge to keep from getting colder. Water pours from me. I could not be wetter. I think about walking down the opposite side of the ridge, but I decide not to. I'm not familiar with the ground. I think no dead lodgepole stands in that direction, but I'm not sure, and I don't know if I would have to cross two ridges or one to reach the road. Once I reached the road, I would still have to hike at least four miles home.

Lightning and thunder move far to the east. Rain stops. Wind dies. It's time to go. It's also very dark under dark clouds still hanging close to the mountain. I leave my tools, except the shovel, which I swing ahead of me like a blind man's cane as I start down the hill, going entirely by feel. I run up against down trees and climb over them, feeling for the ground with my feet. I stoop and feel the darkness with my hands to see if I can go under some of the higher blown-down trees. I keep one hand in front of my face when I move forward, to avoid a limb in the eye.

A large piece of eternity passes in pitch-black night before I finally reach level, clear ground. I slide the shovel along the ground ahead of me and feel my way with my feet. I can see nothing. I find the steep-sided gully at the bottom of the drainage with the shovel and with my feet. I know about where I am, but I don't know if I am above or below my pickup. I don't want to walk all the way across the meadow home, so I try to find it.

I see the ridges across the valley silhouetted against the lighter sky. I see the upper parts of trees around me against the still-cloudy sky, but I can't see anything at all down where I am. I could stumble into the pickup before I see it in front of me. I hope I do. I move a slow step at a time. Sometime, I'm going to have to give up and head for home on foot. Getting there will take a while.

Lightning flashes on the horizon, and I see the pickup, fifteen feet in front of me. I'm as happy to see it as if it is the best pickup in the world.

I drive across the meadow home, build a small fire in the kitchen stove to warm up, and change out of my wet clothes. Everyone sleeps soundly. Later, Laura tells me she had been worried as the storm increased. She prayed and reaffirmed that God takes care of me. At peace with that realization, she went to bed and went to sleep.

At three o'clock, I eat some fruit and cheese, and then I go to bed. Before I sleep, I think a while. Had I known everything that was going to happen on the mountain, I might not have walked into that experience. I'm glad I didn't know what was going to happen. I will remember my time on that ridge in a storm the rest of my life and be glad I was there.

I offer a prayer of gratitude for my life and for the experience I've just had. I drift easily into sleep.

Late the next morning, I drive across the meadow, hike up the ridge and get my tools. No smoke rises from the charred remnants of wood. Late in the day, the Forest Service crew chief comes by the house and has me sign papers. The Forest Service sends me a check for my work, an unexpected dividend.

Cheryl comes out and cuts some firewood. Then Jim quits his job, comes up and stays at the cabin, eats with us and cuts firewood. I work with Cheryl and Jim some afternoons. I set culverts several places where I've been fighting with plastic dams in ditches too large for plastic dams to do the job well, even though what I really want to do is just take the machines back and say, "I've done what I can do with the time I've had," jump off the payroll and get going on some of that seventy-five to a hundred dollars a day work instead of this

twenty-five dollars a day stuff.

It will save me a lot of work in the spring and bring a better crop of hay if I do all the ditch work now, so that's what I do. Then I jump off the payroll with a clear conscience. John is getting his money's worth and then some, so now for us.

Golden Belgian, Golden Autumn

Jack and Eileen drove to Whitney Valley, looking for a place to park their trailer while they cut firewood in national forest. I said they could park their trailer near the corral, and I showed them a good place to cut wood south of the buck pasture. They drove back to the Treasure Valley and brought up a two-year old Belgian gelding, Terry, to pull logs. He was a beautiful, golden horse, about a hundred pounds short of weighing a ton.

I watched Jack and Eileen work with Terry. Jack harnessed him, hooked the harness to logs and led him out of the timber. He hadn't been trained to reins, but he worked well on a lead. They left Terry in the corral when they went back to the valley for a few days, and I fed him and kept a tub filled with water so he could drink.

When Jim saw Terry, he fell in love with him. Jim's worked with horses since before he could walk. He says they had to run his horse into a blind chute and peel him off the horse's back to change his diaper. He says when he was a baby, too small to hang onto a horse, his mother and father used to leave him in the camper on the back of the pickup, tie a mare to the pickup bumper and work cattle in the corral. When he woke up and cried, the mare raised a fuss so his mother and father would know it was time to come and take care of him.

The second story, about when he was small, I believe, because I know animals are like that. Any mother is a mother and reacts to a baby in need. I'm not saying I don't believe the first story, just that I'm not as sure about that one.

Jim had used saddle horses as draft animals, and he had

long wanted to work with a real draft horse. He made a deal with Jack to take care of Terry, fall and winter, and train him some, and Jack brought up hay and left a harness and a singletree. Jim didn't lose much time between making the deal on the horse and bringing him out to the woods, harnessed and ready. Before the sun rose above Cottonwood Butte and took the dew off the stubble on the meadow, he brought Terry out to the edge of the timber, just below where the ridge rose abruptly, offering ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine, western larch and Douglas fir to the morning's blue sky.

Jim walked behind Terry across the mowed meadow and controlled him with the long reins. They walked into the edge of the timber. Jim pulled lightly on the left rein. Terry circled left until he faced the meadow again and stopped when Jim pulled back on both reins. Jim said, "Boy, he does good. Let's pull a log."

"Do you think he's ready to pull a log?"

"Sure. He's pulled logs."

The sun rose and cast warmth into the edge of the timber. I had reservations about hooking Terry to a log, but I figured it was Jim's project. He knows more about horses than I'll ever know, and he must have everything under control.

Jim backed Terry into position. I wrapped a choker around a log and hooked the choker to the singletree. I cleared to the side. Jim said "Hup," and snapped the reins, and Terry humped. He stepped forward, took the slack out of the chains and the choker, and took the weight of the log. The log started into motion, and the dance began. Terry bolted into a gallop.

Jim held the reins high, so they wouldn't tangle in down wood, ran beside the skidding and bouncing log, and talked to Terry as he ran. They cleared the timber onto the open

meadow. Jim leaned back a little on the reins. Terry didn't slow down, but he did start into the wide left turn Jim signaled with the reins. He slowed in the turn, but he saw the log bouncing behind and to one side, and he bolted into a gallop again. Even in a hard gallop, he stayed in the turn Jim signaled with tension on the long left rein.

The log slid toward Jim. He jumped it and jumped it again and brought Terry into a tighter circle. He turned Terry on smooth, mowed ground and jumped the log every time it slid to him. Terry and Jim and the log galloped, jumped, and slid through ten big circles on the meadow, until Terry got more used to the log, listened to Jim more, responded to the reins more, slowed down, and finally stopped when Jim told him to stop.

I walked over and unhooked the log. Jim took Terry farther out on the meadow, turned him left, then right, then around in a circle just on the reins, and Terry obeyed every command. They walked back to where I stood. Jim stopped Terry, and Terry stood patiently.

I asked, "Did you know he'd never pulled a log except when he was led?"

"No, I sure didn't know that."

"While I was watching that dance out there on the grass, I thought I probably should have told you that before you started, but I thought you knew it."

"Well, I'm sure glad you didn't tell me, cause I sure did enjoy the way that worked out. That was real good training for Terry, cause he had a chance to try to get rid of that log, and he found out he couldn't do it on his own."

"It was pretty to watch, but it could have ended up with a busted-up horse or man or both. If that happened in timber, where you didn't have a big chunk of open ground to run him

down, we could have had some big problems.”

“Yeah. I know that. He needs a lot of working with before I’ll hook him up to a log again.”

When we finished cutting wood that day, we built a slip that put a surface of boards three-feet wide and twelve-feet long on the grass, with a chain hooked to the front of it so we could hook the singletree to the slip. We put two bales of hay across the slip to sit on. I ran to the house while Jim circled Terry, pulling the slip behind him, slowly on the smooth, mowed ground north of the barn. I said, “Come on everybody. We have something really fun going on out by the barn. Hurry. Terry and Jim are waiting for us.”

Laura, Juniper, and Amanda ran with me to the meadow, and we all rode on the slip until after dark.

Slipping across a mowed meadow is a smooth, quiet way to travel. Terry’s hooves thud as he trots, but the grass roots and stubble muffle the sound, and the slip makes hardly a sound as it slides across the stubble. We all sit on hay bales on the slip, and Terry pulls us to the top of the ranch and back, with a lot of stops for rest. Jim says, “It’ll take him a while to build his wind up. We can’t push him very hard yet.”

If he understands what we want him to do, Terry does it happily. Sometimes, something startles him, and he breaks into a full gallop. He isn’t supposed to gallop unless Jim tells him to, and Jim works to teach him not to, but we love smooth, fast slip rides at a gallop. The meadow is wide, so we have plenty of room to turn the horse and tire him out.

We laugh a lot out on the meadow, and we enjoy the rides, fast or slow. Funny things happen.

I moved from the rear bale to sit on the forward bale, and Amanda said something. I said, “Oh, I’m sorry. Did I step on your toe?” and Terry came to an abrupt stop.

Jim said, “Now horse, what are you up to?”

I said, “I asked Amanda if I stepped on her toe. I think Terry thought somebody said whoa.”

We slip across the meadow every day, usually late in the day, after we’ve cut wood. Often, we’re out on the meadow as dark falls into the valley. Juniper and Amanda go with us. They love this daily adventure. So does Jim. I do. Terry does. Laura leaves her motherly, taking care of the house and family duties and her spiritual study and goes with us sometimes.

We start putting one of the girls up on Terry while everybody else slips behind. Amanda rides Terry when he breaks into one of his sudden gallops. Amanda slips far to one side of the big, galloping, golden horse and looks like she might fall off. I step to the front corner of the slip, ready to jump off to try to knock her out of the way of the slip if she falls, but she grabs hold of the hames, pulls herself up to a firmer seat, and holds on.

Jim brings Terry down to a trot, then to a walk, then stops him. I walk up beside the horse and lift Amanda down. “Were you afraid?”

“No. That was really fun. That’s even more fun than riding on the slip. Let’s do it again. I want to ride some more.”

“Well, I was scared when he started galloping and you looked like you were going to fall off.”

“I wasn’t scared. Now that I know what to hold onto, I never will fall off.”

Terry was a good horse for anyone with fear of horses, of which I had some, to be around. We could do anything with him, lean up against the back of his back legs, crouch and walk around under his belly, pull on his tail, lift his feet.

Jim rode Terry bareback the first time by stepping from the top corral rail onto Terry's back. Terry jumped to one side, then figured out what had happened and seemed to decide, okay, sure, you want to sit there and ride, go ahead and do it. Jim rode Terry out of the corral and down across the meadow, and Terry acted like he'd been ridden all his life and was an old pro at it.

People come to visit, and we take them slipping, and everybody loves it. Everybody always wants more, slipping quietly across the meadow a while before dark, when the day cools down. Juniper and Amanda always go with us when we slip. All their other adventures can wait. The smell of stubble hangs in the air. Ravens on the meadow go about their business undisturbed by our activities. The cranes, up at the top of the ranch, watch the horse and the people on the slip, who watch the cranes.

About twenty elk trot across the top of the meadow, just our side of the boundary fence, and up into the timber. They're on their rounds, and they aren't afraid of us.

We tried Terry on logs several times again. Part of the time, it went smooth as silk, but several times, he blew up and galloped clear to the river, and Jim couldn't stop him or even bring him into a circle, so we agreed to leave him out of the wood-cutting operation.

I said, "We don't really need to move the logs anyway. As long as we clear access to the wood, people will load it right where we cut it, so I can't justify using the time. You can work with him all you want, though. We can keep track of who cuts what and divide the money by how much we cut."

"Well, I'll work with him some when we're through cutting wood for the day, but I'll stick with you cutting wood."

I wondered about that decision a few times. I wanted to learn more about handling horses. I wanted to have good times mixed in with the hard work. But a ranch hand's wages are low, and I didn't get those when winter hit hard enough to stop the outdoor work, so I wanted to sell enough firewood to support my family until the ranch work checks started coming in again in the spring.

Late fall, Scott came down and asked if we knew where he could get thirty straight logs to finish building his house. I said, "I know where we can get some. They're scattered through live timber, though. We'd have to yard them out."

Jim said, "I got a horse can pull those logs out for us." I didn't say anything. It wouldn't be part of our wood-cutting operation. The trees were on the lower ranch, not in my contract area, so I figured Jim could make his own decision about it, and I'd work with Jim and Scott, however they decided to do it. The red tractor sat by the barn, and John would say, sure, go ahead and use it if we called and asked, but none of us mentioned it.

I carried my saw into the timber and selected straight, dead lodgepoles standing among dead and live trees, dropped them, limbed them, and cut them to length. Jim rode Terry across the meadow, brought him into the timber, and backed him into position. I hooked the choker to the singletree. Terry took the slack and put the log into motion. I had all the logs ready, so I followed them out so I could see how it went. Jim pulled the reins for a little left, and Terry went a little left. Jim said, "Hup. Make a little speed to clear that rise," and Terry humped and made a little speed. Jim said, "Slow down now easy," and put just a little tension on the reins, and Terry slowed down easy.

Whatever Jim said to do, Terry did exactly, no questions,

no arguments. They snaked their way around trees, stumps, and slash piles. They brought the logs down onto the road alongside the fence, stopped, unhooked the chokers, left the logs there, and dragged chains and chokers back into the timber. I went along and chokered more logs, and they did the whole thing over again. It was one of the best shows I ever did see, partly because I knew everything that led up to it, and partly because it was a beautiful process, beautiful horse and beautiful man working very well together.

Scott loaded the logs onto the trailer with the backhoe. When Terry pulled the last of the logs down onto the road, Jim and I helped Scott load them onto the trailer, and Scott pulled the trailer across the meadow behind his pickup.

The sun slipped down behind Greenhorn. Jim leaned against Terry. He said, “This is one smart horse. He wanted to gallop, but he saw all the trees and stumps and brush piles, so he figured he’d better depend on me to keep him from getting everything tangled up.”

“I saw that happen. He thought his way into obedience.”

Nobody Works Like the Old Timers Did

September 1. Daybreak. Heavy frost in the valley. Laura cooked us as many pancakes as we could eat. Juniper and Amanda got up, ready for breakfast and ready to greet the day. We had talked about starting school for the year, but we hadn't started it. After they helped Laura with kitchen duties, Amanda and Juniper would adventure out into the cold morning. I stuffed pancakes away after I felt like quitting, or I'd get hungry and shaky before ten o'clock. Jim stuffed them away without having to work at it. We were going to get hungry and shut down to eat something not long after ten anyway.

Jim's pickup warmed up in the driveway while we drank coffee. "Jim, can you get the saws? I'll get the rest of the tools. Let's get out there and see if we can cut a cord of wood each before the sun comes up and it starts getting hot."

Three sandhill cranes performed a long-legged dance on the meadow above the river. Jim let his pickup roll to a stop and took it out of gear. "Now what is that about?"

"They're kicking Junior out of the family. They're threatening him, telling him to move off and make it on his own, give them some privacy now."

"Oh yeah. I see that's what they're doing."

The adult crane spread its wings, thrust its head forward, and ran at the juvenile, who backed, turned, took to wings, and flew down toward the river. It landed on the bank above the river and then walked hesitantly back toward high ground. Jim said, "He don't give up too easy."

"Takes him a while to understand. He'll tag along close for a while yet."

Jim put the clutch in and slipped the pickup back into gear. He said, "I guess we can't do him any good anyway."

"Or her. Could be a her. Males and females are so much alike with cranes, I don't know how to tell the difference."

"A her? Gee, maybe I should go talk to her mama and daddy." But he let the clutch out, swung wide to avoid interrupting the cranes, and headed for the timber. "Damn, now look at that. They're all doing it. That's what them hawks are doing, isn't it?" He let his pickup coast to a stop and took it out of gear again.

I said, "Sure is. What they lack for size beside the cranes, they sure make up in fierce looks."

"I hope they taught that kid how to kill a mouse before they kicked him out."

"He's probably been feeding himself for a while now."

"Well, he must be doing all right at it. He looks healthy."

"Or she. Could be a female. Hard to tell the difference with those hawks, too."

"Now. Take it easy on that. I need a little time to get used to the idea."

"You could stay around and shoot mice for her while I go cut some wood."

"Or him. No, I'm cutting wood." He drove to the edge of timber, just below where the forested ridge rose toward the early morning sky, where we'd been working. We unloaded our tools. The sun rose above Cottonwood Butte and shone rainbow colors through frost on the grass along the edge of the timber. The morning smelled fresh and cold, like pine trees, like frost on the grass, like autumn on the meadow.

Jim walked up and down the edge of our work area. "Can I fall that first bunch of trees there?"

"Can you?"

“Sure. I’ll show you. How do you want ‘em?”

“Lay ‘em all out on the meadow. Angle the tops together so we don’t have to pile as much slash. Limb ‘em and pile the limbs as you go, so we won’t have limbs from several trees all tangled together, keeping us from getting at the wood.”

“I’ll do it. You just watch.”

“No. I’m going up there and work my way back toward you. Don’t take any chances. If you’re not absolutely sure it’ll go just right, shut it down and come and get me for help.”

“You just don’t know how good I’m gettin’.”

And he was getting good. Sometimes over confidence snuck up on him, and he started cutting before he figured out all the possibilities of how things might go once the trees started moving, but that sneaks up on me sometimes too. All these dead trees, sometimes things go wild no matter how carefully we plan.

I got one tree started to tip, but it didn’t break at the hinge, the way I wanted it to. The weight of the tree shifting broke rotten roots two feet underground, and the falling tree tipped the stump, roots, and a big chunk of ground with it as it fell. I threw my saw away and jumped off the edge of the rising ground sideways, thrown off balance. A broken root came up fast as the tree fell, hit me in the shoulder and side of the head, and spun me around and away. I danced for my balance through jumbled slash head on into a standing tree, wham, and sat down hard.

It took me a minute to gather my senses. I took my hardhat off and looked at it. No dent. I looked up the hill. Jim’s limbing a big tree he just dropped, and he didn’t see it happen. Just as well. It makes a better story to tell than to watch happen. I picked up my saw and limbed and bucked up the tree whose root had knocked me down, and I piled the

branches.

When we worked up near the top of the ranch, I notched a tree the way I wanted it to fall and started my cut from the back. The air didn't stir that day. Oily gasoline smoke rose from the saw and burned my nose and throat. Five cubic inches of gasoline engine screamed, working hard at ten thousand r.p.m.s. Wood dust and wood chips poured from the cut, backstopped down my leg, and piled on the ground.

Rotten wood broke. The tree settled back on my saw. I drove a plastic wedge behind the bar, but the rotten wood wouldn't hold it. I drove another wedge, and more wood broke away, so I picked up a pole, leaned it against the tree, and tried to push it over, but it wouldn't move.

Jim saw me fighting the tree and came over to help. He put his saw down, picked up a pole, and set it against the tree. We both pushed. The tree moved a little, then settled to the side, and the hinge broke. Rotten wood of the stump broke away under the shifting weight. The tree started to tip backward, headed for Jim's saw, my saw actually, but the one he usually uses.

Jim stepped over, picked up the saw, and quick stepped out of the way as the tree slammed into the ground.

"Jim, don't you ever do that again. Not while you're working with me, not for my saw."

"I got it."

"I know you did. But all you'd need to do is hook your bootlace on a stub, or catch your toe under a branch, anything that would delay you for two seconds. Then I'd have to watch you get killed by a falling tree. Never put yourself in danger to go after a saw. You know who'd have to drive down and tell your mother I let you get killed trying to save a stupid old five-hundred dollar saw?"

“Well, I must have needed to hear about that. I always go after it.”

“You used to always go after it. You don’t anymore.”

We ate lunch. Jim said, “It must be eighty-five degrees already. We cut four cords yet?”

“Maybe three. If we work up everything that’s down, we’ll get five. I’d like to get five and lay down three or four more and get the trees limbed, if we can. It’d give us a leg up on tomorrow’s work.”

“Okay. You lead. I’ll follow.”

By 2:30, we had bucked all the down trees and dropped a few more. Our saws ran out of gas at the same time, and we fueled up and then sat in the shade.

Jim said, “Must be ninety-five degrees.”

“Pretty hot for cutting wood.”

“Ain’t too hot to go swimming.”

“We could go down and jump in the river for a while.”

“Let’s go up to the reservoir. Cleaner water.”

“That’d take the rest of the day. We wouldn’t get any more wood cut.”

“We already did pretty good, didn’t we? Maybe six cords and a start on tomorrow’s wood.”

“We could cut five cords apiece every day. Then we’d be in good shape heading into winter.”

“We could put in a couple more hours today, I guess.” He leaned back against the aspen tree and pulled the bill of his cap down over his face.

A war goes on inside my head. Work and make another thirty, forty dollars today. Or head for the reservoir and settle for less money.

Some of the old-timers talk inside my head. Gene says, “God yes. Nobody does work like we used to. Used to be two

men started before daylight with a two-man saw, a misery whip, you know, and axes, and they got back after dark, with a hundred trees ready to haul in. Big trees. You see the stumps all over these mountains, virgin timber. Why hell, two men with chain-saws don't match that today. They put in five or six hours, and they're through for the day. Nobody works like we used to; that's what they say, and it's true. But they sure do expect to get paid big money for what little they do."

Henry said, "We'd make love till two in the morning and then get up at five and go work fourteen hours and come back and do the same thing the next day. We never got tired. Nobody works like that anymore. It's a different breed they're raising now."

I said, "Jim, if I'd had two-hundred cords in the barn last winter, I could have sold it all. I resolved I'd cut it and haul it this year no matter what. The work season's short here, so we'd better make firewood while the sun's shining."

He tipped up his cap, looked at me, got up, and picked up his hard-hat and his saw.

I said, "So let's load up the tools, stop at the house and get Laura and the girls and head for the reservoir. We can hit it earlier tomorrow."

When we're in the timber, we keep the saws in the wood all we can. Drop trees. Cut the limbs off. Buck the logs into sixteen or eighteen or twenty-inch lengths. Pile the limbs. Cut stumps flush with the ground where trucks need access to wood.

Ladderback woodpeckers harvest grubs from the trees as soon as we cut them.

Hot. Every day. "Man, it's the humidity. You know, ninety degrees ain't so hot. I've worked hard at a hundred degrees, but it's muggy. I sweat a gallon, and it runs off like

it's raining. It don't evaporate and cool me down."

"All these seeps along the edge of the timber keep the humidity way up. Sometime in the fall, even if it doesn't rain, these seeps will start running more water, and it'll be a big swamp all the way across the meadow to the river. So we'd better cut it and haul it while the ground's dry enough to get across."

I sharpened my chain in the shade. Jim ran his tank out and came down to fuel up.

"How's that chain, Jim?"

"Wouldn't hurt to touch it up."

"You know something? If we hit it hard for another hour and a half, we'll be tired and right into the heat of the day, and we'll want to quit. If we're smart, we could pick up Laura and the girls and go swim in the Powder River. We could eat dinner in town and get back here by 6:00 and work about two hours before it gets dark."

"Sounds good to me. It'd be cooler then."

We swam. Amanda and Juniper worked at swimming. I held them while they paddled, but soon, Juniper said, "I don't think we're learning much this way. This is boring."

Amanda said, "Let's just play. I think we'll learn just as fast that way."

"Maybe faster."

We skipped rocks up the river. I sent one around the curve, eleven skips and still going when it went out of sight. We all agreed that ought to go in the book of records. I wasn't able to do it again, though I tried for a while.

We ate dinner at One-Eyed Charlie's. Juniper and Amanda ate lightly, because they wanted pie and ice cream for dessert. Jim ate two of the biggest hamburgers, with two meat patties each and cheese and mushrooms, then pie and

ice cream. I kept to the middle of the road, and I started to fidget because I wanted to get back in time to get some wood cut. But I didn't say anything, because I knew pushing the crew didn't work and took some of the pleasure from our experiences, for me as well as for everyone else.

We got home about quarter til seven. We unloaded our recreational materials from the pickup and loaded tools. I looked at Jim, and he looked at me. We walked over and sat down on the front porch. I said, "By the time we got all the way out there and got set up to work, we wouldn't get much done before dark."

"Nope."

"We might neither one of us ever own anything much in this world."

"My treasure's in here." He tapped his forehead. "I seen them cranes dancing, and them hawks, and we've been seeing elk almost every day. I've been living up here in this valley where I always wanted to live, and I've just about got my pickup paid for. I've been having a hell of a lot of fun with Terry and playing around the country. Being a partner makes it just right, cause I sure do like working for myself."

"I like it too. Let's make sure we get through the winter, though."

"Oh yeah. My pickup's about paid for, but it ain't paid for. I want to have me a stake together going into winter. I want to work too. Come to it, I could leave some of the playing behind and get on with more work. It'd be fine with me if you put the pressure on for getting more work done, cause I know, come winter, I'll be really glad you did. I guess I'm just about caught up on playing."

"I don't want the responsibility for your motivation. I have all I can do to keep a fire going under mine. I never

could decide if the grasshopper got the best deal or the ant did. I've been anting along here for several years, and I haven't seen much of this country around. I haven't gone swimming much, and I haven't spent much time exploring the area with my family. I'm not necessarily ahead of where I would have been if I'd done some more playing along the way."

I said, "I like cutting wood. I like selling it and putting the money in my pocket. But I don't like doing it for more than five or six hours a day. I start causing myself physical problems that last for days if I push too hard. I like to work fast and get a lot done and then do something else with the rest of the day. You're not the only force aimed toward short work days. We're doing okay. We're making a good wage. But if we'd put in another hour or two and bring in a load of wood, we'd have a big stack of wood to sell in the winter."

"Let's do it, then."

We did. Some days. Most days, we could sell everything we cut if we just left it on the ground, so why go to the extra work of loading it, hauling it, unloading it and stacking it for ten or fifteen dollars more a cord in the winter? Get the money now. The hourly pay is much better for cutting the wood than it is for loading and hauling the wood. And since the rate of pay is, according to Jim's standards and my standards, quite good, we can afford to take parts of some days and look around the country.

We picked up Laura, Juniper, and Amanda and drove up to Pogue Point lookout. No one watches the forests from that tower rising above evergreen forest on a mountaintop anymore. That method of watching for fires mostly gave way to spotter planes. We walked the catwalk around the building on the tower and looked down on Northeastern Oregon

forest, sagebrush, and meadows. Sunlight went out of the air above the mountain as the sun sank beneath the farthest mountain. Cool wind blew past us on the tower. Nuthatches landed on the cables guying the tower to lichen-covered stone, with dense green moss in the most shaded areas. Oregon juncos flew close to see what we were doing.

Juniper looked down on the world from the high tower. She said, "I don't want to go back down. I want to stay up here forever."

Amanda sat on the steps about halfway up. I sat down beside her. I said, "Are you afraid to go higher?"

"Well, I'm not afraid to go this high, but I think I would be afraid to go higher."

"I'll hold your hand and walk up with you if you want me to."

"I think I can see just about everything from here that I could see if I went all the way up."

"Yes. I think you're right about that."

We drove to Earmuff Spring one afternoon. Half an hour down a steep, rough dirt road in Jim's pickup, Laura said, "My goodness. Are we going to tip over?"

Jim said, "I never have before. But maybe we'd all better lean uphill." We did. Amanda and Juniper were small then, but five of us in the cab was tight. We didn't mind.

At the foot of the hill, forest gave way to open meadow and to sage brush. We left the pickup parked on the sagebrush flat at the end of the road and scattered out. Juniper and Amanda formed a self-sufficient team, played games or performed a play one of them had written, or they made up and performed plays on the spot. They sought adventures far enough from adults to feel independent, but close enough to move in quickly if the adults found anything interesting.

We all gathered together again and walked through meadows and sage brush. Laura said, "In just this short distance from the pickup, I've seen six kinds of wildflowers still in bloom, this late in the year. Look at these tiny white flowers right down against the ground." Amanda and Juniper got down on their hands and knees, looked at the flowers up close, and smelled them. Jim got down on his hands and knees by Juniper and Amanda and studied the flowers. I thought, six months ago, he might have refused to do that. Even now, he probably wouldn't do that for anyone but Laura or Juniper or Amanda.

Two mountain bluebirds flew from bush to bush in the sage.

Jim and I walked up the hill from the spring into hundreds of acres of beetle-killed lodgepole. Jim said, "We ought to see if we can buy this timber. Must be more than a thousand cords of firewood just on this slope."

"Getting it out would be a problem. Lots of boggy ground between the timber and the road. We have a lot of wood to cut where we're working before we're ready to take on anything else."

Jim jumped from log to log across the edge of the blown-down trees. When he landed on the last log, he slipped, but he jumped into the direction he slipped, twisted in the air, and landed on his feet. He trotted across open ground and walked beside me again. He said, "That's fun. You ought to try it."

"I wouldn't try to run across those trees with my calked boots on, let alone with vibram soles. You be the fancy dancer in this partnership. I slowed down some when I passed forty."

Two bald eagles flew up from the edge of the timber and away from us. We walked up to see what they'd been doing.

They'd been eating from a coyote carcass. I said, "I wonder what killed him."

"Lead poisoning, probably."

We all gathered together again at the pickup and ate bread and cheese and fruit. We watched dusk climb the mountain. We crowded into Jim's pickup and headed home after dark. Amanda fell asleep in my lap on the way home. I carried her into the house, took her shoes off, and put her in bed.

Autumn of Firewood and Guy's Pickup

The days cooled down. Jim and I hit the wood cutting harder, but some afternoons, we still rambled.

The electronic system broke down on my saw. I piled the limbs and tops from the trees I'd cut up. "I'm going to take this saw to town and get it fixed. What do you want to do?"

"I'll stay here and see if I can cut a couple more cords. I'll walk in when I'm ready to quit."

I drove across the meadow to the house. Tony and Phoebe sat on the front porch, visiting with Laura, Juniper, and Amanda while they waited for me to come home so we could deal on firewood.

"Hello Phoebe. How's it going, Tony?"

"Pretty good. Pretty good. How about you? Are you cutting lots of firewood?"

"Have been. Will be again after I take my saw to town and get it fixed."

"And then come back and work until dark?"

"It'll probably get dark before I get back. I know you work long past dark. Did you do that when you were younger too?" Every other old timer I know had given me the how-hard-we-worked lecture, and I figured I might as well hear Tony's version.

"Yes I did. The day wasn't long enough when I was young. Even in the summer, when the sun came up before five and didn't go down till after nine, there weren't enough daylight hours, so I put in quite a few after dark and before daylight. I worked everybody in the family hard too.

"Now, when I look back at it, it was a mistake. My kids hate farming, and some of them don't like me too well either. We never took time out just to have a good time. After all

that hard work, what do I have that you don't have? Oh, I know I own a farm and equipment, and a new car, but how much do those things matter? You've got your health and your family, and you work hard, but you have some time to do what you want to do. How many kids are as happy as your kids? Every time we come to see you, I hear these girls of yours laughing.

“Do you ever go hungry? No. I didn't think so. Do you like it here? Most people would pay good money to take a vacation in country like this, just to have the chance to be here for a while.

“It's good to work, and it's good to have the kids help out, but I overdid it. Nobody needs to go at it that hard. Now I can't quit. I'm still up and going before daylight, and home after dark. To hell with that. Take some time while you're young. Work hard, but not too long. Let the future take care of itself. You've only got this time now to be with your family.”

I said, “Tony, you sure do get my attention. All the other old timers say they worked hard all their lives, harder than anyone works now, and that's the way it should be for everyone, the way they tell it.”

Phoebe said, “What else could they say? They don't want to have to watch you enjoy what they missed, do they?”

One day, I realized the cranes had flown south. I didn't know how long they'd been gone. I just knew they'd been gone for a while. Aspen and cottonwood leaves turned yellow and brown and fell to the ground. Willow leaves and laurel leaves turned red, then left bare bushes as they fell to the ground and started becoming rich soil. Western larch trees turned yellow and stood out from the evergreen forest. Their needles fell in autumn breezes. Cold nights and mornings.

Warm and sunny days.

Terry puts on his thicker, curly winter coat. Jim works with him some afternoons, but more and more, nobody has time for him. I know if I spent time with Jim working with Terry, he'd stay more interested, but there's only so much time in a day, and I need time to be with my family. I could say something to Jim about working with Terry more, but I still hold to the idea that Jim has to provide his own motivation. There's only so much time in a day for Jim, too.

We cut wood all week. We quit early Saturday. I drove across the meadow home and watered the garden. Frost of cold nights ate most of the garden, but carrots, onions, kale, and cabbages still grow. I walked down to the phone house and called several people to be sure they'd come up and buy wood. We wanted to clear everything out and see how much cash we could come up with for a week's work.

We did sell everything we had cut, and we cut all day Sunday while people loaded wood, to be sure everyone got out with a full load. A while before dark Sunday, when the last truck full of wood had headed down the road, I counted out fifteen-hundred and fifty-six dollars on the kitchen table. I said, "Ninety six dollars for expenses. The rest is fifty-fifty. Seven hundred and thirty dollars apiece. Not too bad for a week's work."

Jim said, "That's more than I make working for John in a month. That's a month and a week, working for John. And this is a hell of a lot more fun."

Late one afternoon, we took Laura and Amanda and Juniper to Baker to the station and put them on the train to go to California to visit Laura's family. The train clacked out of sight down the tracks, and Jim drove us to the grocery store. We tried to buy so we could eat well without using up too

much time cooking. Jim would eat a lot of instant foods if necessary, but I wouldn't. We planned white beans and ham and cornbread. Cornbread and chile beans. Jim would like to go heavier on meat, and I don't object to doing that for a couple of weeks. It makes cooking easier sometimes. We load up with roasts we can cut into steaks and summer sausage to supplement lunches.

Jewel's going to board out until Laura gets back to milk her. I need to cut and sell wood while the weather allows it, so I don't want to have to milk morning and evening. We won't have goat's milk yogurt for a while.

We drive up the mountain home well supplied, and we put everything away. I water the garden and pull weeds while Jim harnesses Terry and slips across the river and up the meadow. We eat dinner just at dark, food Laura cooked and left for us; little work for our food this first day.

The next several meals, I cook and clean up, until I start to get angry about it, so when we're through with dinner, I say, "You have to cook or wash dishes. I'm not going to do both."

"Okay. Well, if I get my choice, you cook, cause you're a damn good cook. What I could come up with would kink a gut." Once in a while, I have to remind him, but mostly not.

We get permission to take the dead wood from the next ranch up the valley. We drive up the meadow, leave the pickup at the fence, and walk up through dead lodgepole. Jim says, "This is really good cutting. Lots of big trees."

"I think we can take an order of house logs off the edge of the meadow. I have an order for a hundred logs. We can do that while we cut firewood, just don't buck up the trees that make good house logs. Deck them. Michael'll bring a loader and a truck and haul them from here in about a month. That gives us time to get a lot of the firewood out of the way so we

can get to the trees we need, straight trees, with a minimum of taper.”

We cut firewood, selected trees for house logs, and yarded the house logs into decks with the tractor. It rained for three days and softened the ground until I didn't want to haul anything across the meadow. Empty rigs wouldn't rut the meadow, so we still went to work every day, burned slash and cut more firewood, and the ground dried out enough. More people bought firewood, loaded it, and hauled it away.

I said, “I'm not going to cut any more house logs. Michael's delayed twice, and I don't know if he'll show up.”

Some of the people coming up from Treasure Valley for firewood brought us tomatoes, squash, corn, potatoes, onions, and beans. None of them would accept a discount on their firewood for what they brought. Laura, Amanda, and Juniper came home during the flow of produce, and we ate good stews, heavy with fresh vegetables. Carrots, small onions, and kale came from our own garden. We picked a few strawberries, but frosts had bitten most of the blossoms, and the berries were sparse.

Jim dropped out of washing dishes when Laura and the girls came home. I took him aside and talked about men and women in modern times. “If you make more work for Laura by being here, then you have to contribute to doing the work, by washing dishes, cooking, splitting wood, some way. We can't expect Laura and Juniper and Amanda to do all of it just because they're female.”

He washed all the dishes for a few days and did it cheerfully. He said, “I hate washing dishes, but what I love about washing dishes, I can think about something else altogether, until I don't even know I'm washing dishes.”

Laura started washing breakfast dishes so we could head

for work earlier, but Jim washed the supper dishes every day. I split wood and kept the woodbox full and rounded up as high as it would go. I didn't want a low woodbox to remind Jim I'd said a man could split wood or wash dishes. I like splitting wood more than washing dishes. I didn't say anything until the several times I'd cooked and washed dishes were caught up and then some.

Mornings, after Jim and I ate breakfast and got our lunch together, which included goat's milk yogurt again, and left to cut firewood, Laura and the girls had school at the kitchen table.

Jim and I loaded some of the trucks, just to get the wood sold, for older people, who were getting to the edge of their wood-loading abilities. After we finished loading five cords on the first truck, I said, "I sure want to avoid that. When I stand up and look it in the face, I'm about at the edge of my wood-loading abilities already myself."

Jim said, "I wouldn't want to do too much of it either, and I ain't even got my full growth yet."

Tony and Red brought up an elevator, so we could load more trucks for them and for their friends. Put the wood in a foot off the ground, and the elevator carries it to where you want it on the truck. It helps, but it doesn't make easy work of loading. The gas motor stinks and roars, and the chain and the pulleys rattle, clatter, and clank. Whoever receives wood up in the truck has to be alert or get hit by fast-moving wood.

George brought up a beet truck that would haul seven and a half cords of wood and left it so we could load it. Cheryl came out to work with us again. We planned to spend most of every day cutting wood and take the last hour or so to feed wood to the big truck. After some of the ancient, underpowered trucks we'd loaded and piloted around, the big

truck was a dream for getting into the timber over rough ground. It had eight drive wheels in the rear, low gearing, and power steering and brakes. It went where we wanted it to go without the driver busting a muscle fighting the steering at slow speeds on rough ground with a load.

The second day the truck was there, I started to move it, and the front of the driveshaft dropped onto the ground. It only required pulling sheared ends of two bolts and replacing four bolts to fix it, but I didn't have an easy-out nor the right bolts, so I called George and told him what I thought he'd need to bring.

George and Rick, father and son farmers from Treasure Valley, came up. Red and Tony, friends, both farmers, came up in Tony's pickup. In the two pickups, they had plenty of tools and every size bolt they could find, but they still didn't have the right-size bolts. The bolts were "dealer items," fasteners made only by the company that made the truck.

Remember Doc's old log truck? It saved the day. Doc left it in my yard when he left the country because he figured it would be more hassle to get it ready to move and moved than it would be worth when he got it to where he was going. It needed a lot of help. Even though it was a much smaller truck, the bolts for the driveshaft were the same as on the big truck. Tony and Red pulled out the three that were still in it and put them into the big truck. I asked, "Will three hold it?"

"Sure. If they're cinched tight, they'll hold it. These broke because they loosened up a little and put the pressure on the bolts instead of on the two steel plates clamped together. We'll find another one when we get it home, and we'll send up replacements for the bolts we took out of the white truck."

All seven of us worked together to load the truck so they could take it home with them when they left, almost three

hours work in the late afternoon. We worked fast so they could be well on their way before dark, but we took time to joke and laugh and talk about how people live and what they think about.

George had spent part of his childhood, with his parents, in a prison camp for Japanese-Americans during the second world war. We took a rest, sat on a log, and talked about that. He wasn't bitter, just accepted it as the way it was then, but he said, "I hope nobody ever has to go through anything like that again. I hope people learn, but I don't know if they do. I look for it, but I'm not sure I see it."

Two weeks later, Cheryl headed for Arizona. That seemed like a good thing to do. Jim and I kept cutting wood. Early October. Warm days. Cold nights. It's okay to jump in the river early afternoon, when the sun's on the water. Jim still jumps in after we finish work every day. He goes all amphibian if he's around water much, even if the evenings turn real nippy. I go on to the house and take a bath in the tin tub and signal him up for dinner if he isn't back from the river by then.

He moved his gear into the barn and slept there. Scott and Geralyn needed a place until they finished building their house or until they decided to go to warmer climate for the winter. They had come up from Los Angeles, found a piece of land for sale the other side of the highway, moved up and started building a log house. Jim insisted they use the cabin, with a stove. He said he would enjoy sleeping in the barn.

By then, I had the pickup in good shape. We had gone through three pickups in our years at Whitney, and in the spring of that year, the third pickup sat in the yard, disabled.

Guy showed up that year, not feeling very well. He let his driver's license expire, and he said he didn't plan to drive

anymore. I asked him what he was going to do with his pickup, and he said, "I'll sell it. No use keeping it if I'm not going to drive it."

It was a 73, three quarter ton, four-wheel-drive, four-speed, with an electric winch on the front, the kind of pickup I would have liked to have had. I knew I couldn't afford it, but I asked Guy how much he wanted for it, just out of curiosity, and he said, "Four hundred and fifty dollars. Or three hundred dollars if I take the winch off."

I looked at him for a minute. Then I said, "Guy, that pickup is worth a thousand dollars anyway."

"I know it is. If I sell it to anyone else, I'll get a thousand dollars for it. If you want to buy it, I'll sell it to you for four fifty, or three hundred without the winch."

"Are you sure you want to do that?"

"I wouldn't even mention it if I wasn't sure."

A lot of history ran through my mind. Guy showed up in the spring, and he needed firewood. He asked me to drive him in his pickup someplace where he could cut some wood. I did, and when we got there, it was obvious he no longer had the strength to handle a chain saw. Neither of us said anything about it. I started the saw and dropped two dead lodgepoles and cut them into firewood lengths. He loaded some of it, but I loaded most of it, and I helped him unload it.

When we finished, he held out a five dollar bill, and I said, "Put it back in your wallet. I don't want it." I went over to his place the next day and split the biggest wood we'd hauled back.

He needed to get water, and I drove him in his pickup and got water and helped him unload it at his cabin. When we went after firewood again, I took my saw, and when he saw that was the way it was going to be, he offered his saw to me

at a good price. I told him I had two saws, see if he could get a better price for it, and he sold it in town.

I dropped by his cabin, and he said he had to go do this or do that, and if I saw he wasn't going to be able to get it done, I either went with him and helped him or went and did it for him. At first, I wondered if I should help him for free. He owned more in this world than I did, and he could hire help if he wanted to. Then I decided he didn't own that much more than I did, and even if he did, it was irrelevant. He needed help, and I was able to help him, so I scheduled making sure Guy had everything he needed in with everything else I did, and it worked out just fine for him and for me.

While we talked about the pickup, I knew this was his gratitude, and it was generous. I borrowed the money from Cheryl and bought the pickup. As I sold wood, I fixed everything that was wrong with the pickup, mostly by paying a mechanic to do it while I cut and sold firewood to pay the bill, and we had a good pickup at a very reasonable price.

Guy couldn't make his rounds anymore. He went to live with his sister in LaGrande. His sister brought him up twice to visit. We drove to LaGrande once and visited. We wrote him, but Guy didn't write letters. We didn't see him again, but he holds a warm place in our memories.

Cutting House Logs in Deep Snow

Dark clouds built up above Greenhorn mountain and slid into the sky above Whitney Valley. I called, “Come in here and see the first snow storm of winter coming across the valley.” Amanda, Juniper, and Laura came into the backroom. We stood close in an entanglement of arms around each other and watched through the window as snow walked ahead of the wind down Whitney Valley. Falling snow obscured the mountain in whiteness, then the closer ridges, then the west end of the valley.

According to my mother, the first heavy snow that will stay begins to fall the evening before Thanksgiving. It does often happen that way.

“Remember last year’s first big storm?” I ask.

Muted answers emerge from concentration on the storm approaching us across the valley.

“Uh huh.”

“Yes.”

“Mmmmm.”

Last year, we drove over the mountain to Sumpter for Thanksgiving dinner, only thirteen miles, but such possible weather between. Huge flakes fell densely. At times, I almost couldn’t see the edge of the road. A particularly heavy fall of large snowflakes almost completely obscured my vision, and I stopped. I said, “I think we’re going to have to turn around and go back home.”

Amanda said, “Huh uh. We can’t do that.”

Juniper said, “Everybody’s going to be there. We want to see everybody.”

Amanda said, “All the food, too. We don’t have anything

for Thanksgiving dinner at home.”

Laura said, “Why would it be easier to go home than to go the rest of the way to Sumpter? We’re halfway there. If we get stranded, we might as well get stranded between here and your mother’s place as between here and home.”

That made sense. I couldn’t easily back out. I always insisted we carry survival sacks containing extra clothes, sleeping bags, food, and wood for a fire. If a blizzard stranded us, we had what we needed. I stopped, climbed out into the storm, chained the drive wheels, climbed back in, and drove on. One chain broke and slapped against the fender. I climbed out into falling snow and repaired it.

Even insulated gloves didn’t keep my hands warm enough, but I squeezed the last cross link into place, got back in, passed the pliers over for putting away in the glove box, or in this case, the pliers box, and we drove on to Sumpter. We celebrated a good Thanksgiving at Mom’s place, with loud and happy family all around us.

On the way home, I became engrossed in explaining a mathematical problem to my daughters and it snowed so hard, I missed our turnoff. I said, “That railing on our left has to be the railing about three miles beyond our turn off. It’s where the road slopes down to the river.”

Juniper said, “Maybe you shouldn’t teach math while you’re driving in a snowstorm.”

“Acute. You’ve immediately put your finger on the crux of the problem. If I can turn around and stay on the road, I’ll hold silence until we’re home.”

I turned around and held silence all the way home, even though solutions to math problems boiled in my mind like dry ice in water. We all went to bed very late and very contented.

Now, the four of us lean against each other and watch the storm through the west window. Falling snow closes the meadow away from our vision in whiteness and then blows softly against the house. Instead of standing by the window, entranced by the approaching storm and memories of other storms, comfortable with the warmth of Laura and Juniper and Amanda against me, our arms entwined around each other, I could scurry and take care of some of the details of getting ready for winter.

My lack of panic tells me we are actually ready for winter. Tools buried under snow for four or five months are tools I won't need until spring. I've stacked enough wood in the barn and in the front yard to last all winter, even enough to sell some. Wood over in the timber can stay there until next year.

We've had a very good spring, summer, and fall. We have what we need to begin the winter, and we have the resources, the skills, the knowledge, and the faith to continue to meet our needs as winter deepens. To all our migratory friends who announced their departures, we have issued sincere farewells. To those who did not announce, we give our best wishes for a safe journey, nonetheless.

The next day, John and Cody brought the big green tractor up from the home ranch. Jim and I fed cows every morning and cut wood and burned tops and limbs afterward.

The crew from the home ranch took the cattle down the river road in trucks. Storms added snow to snow until we had two feet of snow on the meadow. Jim and I plowed the snow off our haul-road with the small tractor, and the road froze. People bought wood and hauled it from the timber on the frozen road. Storms blew into Whitney valley, dropped more snow, and blew out of the valley.

Michael brought a bulldozer, bladed house logs up out of the snow, and yarded them two miles down the meadow behind the dozer. We needed more logs. Jim strapped on snowshoes, and I clamped on skis. We carried a saw and a shovel each, traveled across the surface of clean, new snow, and looked for good house logs. Jim put his snowshoes aside, and I my skis. We shoveled snow from around trees, dropped them, limbed them, and bucked them to length, forty feet, thirty-six feet, eighteen.

We strapped our gear on again and packed to the next trees I'd marked. Once I was off the skis, I floundered, three feet deep in soft snow. Snow hung in live trees. We dropped dead trees, and they buried themselves in soft snow. We waded through waist-deep snow, cut off limbs, and struggled to peevy the trees over and cut off limbs that had buried themselves in snow.

Snow covered the meadow. Snow covered the mountain. Air above the mountain meadow stayed clear and cold. Winter sunshine touched us only lightly with warmth. I carried icicles in my beard and mustache, damp and dripping. On the coldest days, I carried frost that stayed white and solid in my beard and mustache.

I liked the experience of working in deep snow and deep cold, but once again, awareness of the inefficiency of working in winter conditions began to detract from my enjoyment.

We hooked eight logs behind the dozer. Michael pulled them down the meadow through late afternoon. Darkness dropped on us halfway down the meadow. Jim and I inched along in the pickup with the headlights on behind the dozer to light up Michael's road. Snow fell lightly. The ancient, nearly worn-out, massive bulldozer labored mightily to maintain

motion. Every day for two weeks.

I drove to the barn before daylight and loaded four bales of hay into my pickup to haul them to the goathouse. Jim walked out of the barn, headed for the kitchen. “You need any help with that hay?”

“I got it. Thanks, Jim.”

“What’s the thermometer say?”

“Twelve below zero.”

“Wa-hoo. I knew it dropped.”

“You’re welcome to move into the living room and sleep by the stove any time you want to.”

“So far, I really like it out here.”

Willy and Verna and John and Gertie showed up for elk-hunting season. They use the cabin that sits back a ways, across the road from our house. We visited back and forth, and before they left, Willy said, “Jim, we won’t need the cabin until next year. Go ahead and use it. Then you’ll have a heater and propane lights, even a propane cookstove.”

By then, Jim wanted to get out of the barn, so he moved to their cabin when they left.

Night settled into the valley as we brought the day’s logs across the meadow. We stopped on the edge of the bench-ground and sat in the pickup with the engine running. The dozer roared, rattled, and clanked slowly away from us, headed for the river at a half-mile an hour. The pickup headlights lit up the road clear to the river. An owl flew from the riverbank up the river, out of reach of our headlights.

It’s about twenty degrees below zero. If Jim shuts the pickup off, it cools down fast, and our breath freezes to ice on the windows, so he keeps the engine running.

I said, “Jim, where’s all your energy coming from?”

“This is fun. I really like it.”

“Your long legs make it easier to get through the snow. I’m high-centered in a drift about half the time. Some of it’s fun, but I keep thinking if Michael had gotten here on time, we could have finished the job in one fourth of the time. Even getting here when he did, if he’d brought a decent piece of machinery instead of that unborn red wreck, we could have finished before now. Eight hundred dollars for us in the order, whether we do it in three days, like we could have done it, or two weeks like it’s taking now.”

“Nothing else to do.”

“I could be sitting by the stove, writing or playing my guitar or reading to Juniper and Amanda or teaching them math. We could be cutting firewood at a hundred dollars a day apiece.”

“We don’t have any orders for firewood.”

“Haven’t you been hearing what I’ve been saying, or don’t you believe me? If we stack it in the barn, we can sell it later this winter.”

“Sure haven’t seen anybody come around asking about it, and it’s already winter.”

“What are you going to do next summer?”

“I don’t know. I’d like to ramble. I thought I’d have a stake for it, but I don’t have much. I can stop and work on a ranch for a while, then ramble again.”

“Sounds good. Ranch work is such low pay, there’s bound to be some available.”

“Might have to cut wood for a while in the spring.”

“Not partnered up with me. You can cut wood on my contracts and sell it, but we aren’t a good-enough team to partner next year. Burns me a little now to see you so fired up with energy, when all summer and fall, I had to push to get a five-hour day.”

“You mean I’m dissolved?”

“After we finish this season.”

Michael turned from the meadow down through the willows along the river. Jim dropped the pickup into gear, and we caught up with the bulldozer as Michael turned down the bank and forded the river. We waited with the lights on the river while he yarded the logs across the shallow water, still open because we crossed every day, but with thick ice above the water both sides of the ford. The bulldozer started up the bank the other side of the river, and we drove down and crossed the running water. Falling snow increased. Large, flat flakes of snow floated down densely.

Michael called Richard to come up and help keep the bulldozer running. The two of them stayed with Jim in his cabin, and we all ate together at our place. Laura fought the flu. It was all she could do to take care of the girls, milk Jewel mornings and evenings, and keep the meals coming.

We yarded logs into the corral at 7:30 and unhooked them. Michael bladed them up onto the deck of logs we’d already brought in. Then we broke ice and packed snow out of the dozer tracks with shovels and bars. I said, “You guys manage without me. I’m going to go wash dishes so we can eat. Unless somebody else would rather wash dishes than clean dozers.”

“Pass.”

“You go ahead on it.”

The driver brought his log truck around the long way, on the plowed highway. He left it in the corral so we could load it.

I told Jim and Michael and Richard, “You don’t need all four of us. I can’t watch you raise logs with that boom and let them down to somebody standing on the load. I’d be frozen

with fear that someone would get hurt or killed.”

After the truck went down the highway with a load of logs, Jim said, “You were right about loading that truck. I damn near did get killed. Good thing you didn’t watch. I got up on the load and guided logs into place. Three times that damned winch slipped, and the logs come down, Boom. Just happened they didn’t fall on me, but if any of ‘em had come for me, wouldn’t have been a damned thing I could do. No time to move. Cattiest man in the world couldn’t save himself if one came right for him.”

Yarding out the logs tore up the frozen snow surfacing the road across the meadow. New snow and drift filled in the road, beyond what the wheel-tractor could plow. Michael said, “You guys can use the dozer to clear your road if you want to keep cutting firewood.”

I said, “I never did see that thing start with less than three hour’s work and two cans of ether. What do you think Jim?”

“No thanks.”

Jim and I played chess afternoons and evenings. Ravens flew over, croaking about winter. We started teaching Juniper and Amanda to play chess. We all liked being at Jim’s place some evenings. It gave us someplace different to be; the company was good; and the propane lamps shed brighter light than our kerosene lamps at home. The cabin leaked a lot of air, so we had to be hardy on a cold and windy night, even with the stove roaring.

We sold the wood we had stacked in the barn, a few cords at a time.

Jim got a job down in the valley, feeding cattle. He took Terry down to his mother’s place for the winter and stayed there while he worked. After a month, he got tired of it and quit. He drove up to our place. “I’m on my way to Montana.”

“Going to ramble?”

“Ramble a little; work a little. See some of my family. I sure did realize how stupid I was not to keep after it harder while we could get the wood out. Hadn’t been for your dumb partner, we’d been selling wood right along. Wouldn’t have to worry where the next few bucks comes from.”

“You can’t take all the credit for that. I thought I cleared that up at the time. Both of us working together did that. I could have pushed harder or worked more hours by myself if I’d been that hot for it. I didn’t mean to lay it all on your shoulders. I was running scared about winter money. I was getting angry at the way Michael’s project took all our time because he didn’t get here when he said he would. I said more than I meant.

“I’m glad we did it the way we did. I enjoy the work I do, the ranch work and cutting wood, but I never did anything but work until last summer. We’ll still just squeak through this winter, like all the other winters, but we will squeak through. I did a lot of swimming and a lot of kicking around the country I wouldn’t have done otherwise. I had more time with my family, and they got to see more of the country and have some good times kicking around. We wouldn’t have had much of that until I was about eighty-six, the way it was going. All of us really enjoyed your company too.

“So, if you aren’t regretting it for the sake of your own wallet, then there’s nothing to regret. We did a good piece of work. Not like the old-timers did, but good enough, and we got to do some things the old timers never did get to do. Anyway, if you want to partner with me next year, you’re welcome to.”

“I’m glad you told me that. It eases my mind. I might make it back here in the spring and partner with you again.

Now that I know everything I know and I got some of the playing caught up, we could fill the barn clear to the top with wood.”

“I’d like to do that. Just let the money roll in all winter. But I wouldn’t want to get too serious either. A man’s going to wind up in the same place if he works himself to death or takes it a little easier and has some fun on his way.”

Winter on the Meadow

Juniper, Amanda and I work on math. I read *Wind in the Willows* to them again, over many days. It's the third time I've read it to them, and I hope we read it together another dozen times. They've read the book themselves, but we've never given up reading aloud, and we probably won't until they're grown up and on their own.

Some days, I cross the river and ski up the meadow. I want to see how some of the other creatures in the valley are doing. Most of the birds left before the heavy snows came and the coldest weather started. Ravens stay. They eat whatever they find, carrion, voles, I don't know what all. They don't answer questions. They just fly over on their way somewhere. Sometimes I see several of them together on the snow out on the meadow. Some days, I hear their croaking comments from up in the timber.

Owls and hawks stay. This morning, a red-tailed hawk stands on a post of an old hay yard and surveys the snow covered meadow. I ski past the hay yard and halfway to the timber, and I find a small hole in the snow, tiny paw prints around it. Five feet from the hole, wing marks in the snow. End of the trail.

Voles stay active under the snow all winter. They eat myriad tunnels through grass roots. One tunneled to the surface here and stayed on the surface long enough for an owl, a hawk, or a raven to make a meal of it. I wonder why voles tunnel to the surface. They don't need to. Thousands of voles live on the meadow, but I find only a few tunnels up. Maybe some of them develop claustrophobia. Maybe some volunteer to help the predators survive the winter. After all,

thousands of voles live on the meadow, and only a few predators. Doesn't nature support the survival of life first, survival of the species next, and survival of the individual last?

I ski toward the timber, then curve and ski parallel to the edge of the timber, downstream. The meadow falls just enough to make the skiing very easy. Push from the trailing ski; push with my ski poles, and glide a long, quiet way.

A yellow and black salamander crawls across the snow on this twenty-degree morning. According to what I've read, it's supposed to stay tucked in under leaves or roots and live at a very slow pace until spring. Small black spiders walk across the surface of the snow. This is the first time I've seen them this year. Many places where I stop and look, I see one or several. What are they doing? Where are they going? Where do they get their energy? What do they eat out here on all this snow?

I'm interested in the answers to these questions but not as interested as I am in the questions themselves. I won't let seeking the answers distract me from seeing how many more questions I can find on the meadow. If I had followed the salamander all morning, to try to discover why it was out on the snow, I wouldn't have seen the spiders. I wouldn't have seen five more tunnels voles used to come to the surface of the snow and become food for a hawk or an owl or a raven.

Can I tell from the marks in the snow which bird took the vole? With my skis spread a foot and a half apart, providing platforms for my feet, I hunker down close to the cold white, granular surface and study tracks and marks of wings. Owls' wing feathers have soft extensions on the ends of the barbs that form the vanes, for quiet flight. Ravens have the most distinct vanes. In soft snow, the difference in the vanes makes

a difference in the way the wings mark the snow. I'm not expert enough to be sure I can read the difference, and I'm not sure how hawks' wing feathers differ from ravens'. I'll look in the books we have at home when I get back and see what I can find out, but I think most of what I can learn is written in the snow in front of me.

What do coyotes eat all winter? Deer move down to lower country before the snow comes. I think elk move down before the snow gets really deep, but I'm not sure of that. Doc said he saw elk yarded up in an aspen grove in the middle of winter up the ridge from here four years ago.

Last winter, when snow lay three feet deep on the meadow, two female wapiti and two calves struggled down the meadow along the edge of the bench ground the other side of the river. Deep snow made heavy going for them, and they made only two miles in an hour. Later, I heard they stayed a while on a ridge south of the valley, where loggers cut trees every day. The elk ate moss from newly-fallen trees. Nobody knew where they went after that. Most winters, the wapitis' tracks tell me they cross the meadow on their daily rounds until snow accumulates about a foot and a half deep. Then I see no more sign until spring.

Coyotes reduce their ranging on the meadow when the snow gets deep. They eat voles. They listen, locate the voles by sound, then thrust their heads clear down through the snow to snap up the small creatures. But it must be impossible to do that when a crust develops or when the snow gets deep. They eat squirrels, snowshoe hares and grouse. At least four coyotes live in the timber bordering our part of the meadow. It would take a lot of meat to keep them healthy all winter. They sing over there most nights. They aren't starving.

I ski down the steep bank onto the river. Snow has accumulated on the ice, and the river's surface provides smooth skiing, so I glide down the river. Beavers don't build houses in the river. They tunnel from underwater into the bank and build rooms above water level to live in. They do build dams, in spring and summer when the water runs low.

Rampaging waters of spring tear the dams out, but by that time, willows have started their spring growth. Beavers eat cambium, the soft, white underbark, from growing willows, and they no longer have to depend on food stored under the ice in the river. When high water from spring runoff drops, beavers build dams in the river again.

Beavers left tracks through the willows in the last snow. Some of them used the slide down the bank onto the river. An incautious beaver, winter frolicking, could be a coyote's food, though the beaver might hold its own in a fight.

I found bobcat tracks in the snow on the bank above the river. I knew it was time to head home for lunch, because my first thought when I saw cat tracks was, "How can the cat get enough food to make it through a long, cold winter with three feet of snow on the ground?"

Coming up the bank from the river, thinking about a grilled cheese sandwich, with garlic sliced very thin onto the cheese before it melts, and a few carrots, I understand one simple answer to all the questions: God, nature, the Earth, the life force, use what name you will, works out every function of life on the meadow in balance and perfect harmony.

Sometimes my perspective is broader if I don't try to answer every question, if I don't try to find an explanation for every action or every image I see. Conclusions, I think, occur only in human minds. On the meadow, in the timber, in the world of nature in balance, in the world of black spiders,

coyotes, bobcats, all their various prey and all the prey's food sources, the only state of mind is the eternal life force.

Amanda, Juniper, and Laura finish school for the day when I get to the house. They've been studying geology and science this cold winter morning. The fire in the cookstove has died down. I put kindling on the coals in the firebox and open the draft, and the fire takes off. I add larger wood and say, "How about grilled cheese sandwiches?"

Everybody says that sounds fine, and Laura and I fix sandwiches while Juniper and Amanda clear the table of papers and books. We sit down and eat lunch. When we finish, Amanda says, "I'd like to ski. Can we all go skiing?"

"Sure." We go out and ski down the hill north of the barn. Juniper and Amanda tire of their skis. I say, "If you practice more, you'll get better at it, and you'll enjoy it more."

"Do we have to?"

"No, you don't have to, but why don't you try one more run down the hill?"

Halfway down the hill, Amanda steps off her skis. "I don't see the advantage of going on skis. Look. I can walk on the crust, and it's easier to walk than ski." Juniper leaves her skis behind and rolls down the hill in the snow. She stands up and stays on top of the crust.

I say, "You two are lighter than I am. I break through the crust. But one advantage of skis is they're faster."

Amanda says, "Are you sure about that?"

"You go on foot, and I'll ski. I'll race you to the river, and we'll see." She started before I was ready, but I had planned to give her a head start anyway, so I wouldn't win by too wide a margin. However, as I started down the hill, her lead grew. I reached the bottom of the hill and skied hard, but I didn't gain much on her.

She stopped on the bank above the river and turned to greet me. She glowed with victory. “What took you so long? I thought you said skis were faster than running.”

“I thought they were. I had no idea you could run so fast. You must have eaten so many carrots for lunch they turned you into a rabbit.”

Juniper and Amanda slid down a high bank onto the river ice again and again. Sunshine warmed us. We left outer clothing hanging in willow bushes. We walked together on the hard surface of the river above our summer swimming holes and above shallow crossings. We scattered out and sought four different visions of winter in Whitney Valley.

We gathered together again as the sun dropped toward the mountains. Winter cold cut through the thin warmth of winter sunshine. We walked on the river upstream. We picked up and put on jackets, gloves and scarves as we went. Behind us, we left ski tracks, footprints, and the marks of someone rolling in snow. We walked up the hill and around the barn and into the house.

We cooked dinner as the sun set. The moon rose, huge and winter white above eastern mountains. The winter day had nourished us as much as the hot food we ate. Moonlight and moonlight reflecting from snow shone in the windows and supplemented the soft, golden glow of light from kerosene lamps.

56 Degrees Below Zero

Clear nights, the temperature drops far below zero. I stay up most of the night, reading, writing, playing my guitar, and feeding stoves. On the coldest nights, I keep all three stoves roaring. Periodically, I prowls through the house, checking every possible place where a fire could start. I'm confident the stoves and flues are safe, but the house is old, of old and very dry wood. If it ever started to burn, it would burn in a hurry. I'm not willing to leave anything unmonitored.

Juniper, Amanda, and Laura work through most of school right after they eat breakfast and wash dishes, while I sleep. Some afternoons, we work for a short time with math. We read, play, write, and work on other creative projects.

By the first of December, we haven't had any more snow, and I'd like to work outdoors. I could sell a few cords of wood, and the money would be useful, so I drive the pickup down the road to Antler Guard Station, where dead lodgepole trees stand close to the road. I chain the drive wheels and back in toward the trees as far as I can go before the snow stops me. I pull out in the tracks I've made, back in again, farther, and pull out again. Each time I back in, I make it a few feet farther, until I've packed a road to the trees.

I drive the truck out of the way and drop trees into the road I've packed, limb them, and buck some of them into firewood lengths, but I run out of day before I finish. I load some of the wood and head for home. I can come back tomorrow and finish cutting the wood and haul the rest of it home.

But in the morning, I feel lousy. I have a touch of flu or something. I don't feel like going outside, let alone like cutting and loading wood. I sleep most of the day. When I'm

not sleeping, I sit quietly, doing nothing at all, or I read.

The next morning, I feel better, but I still don't feel very energetic.

A man who works for the outfit logging the mountain southwest of us drives a large road-building machine up the county road to its intersection with the highway. Another worker drives a truck with a lowboy trailer down the highway and meets the big machine. The driver backs the trailer into the county road, and they start to load the machine, but the big machine drops one wheel off the side of the trailer. They can't get it loaded the rest of the way or unloaded. They block the county road. There isn't much traffic up the county road in winter, but what there is has to wait while the men work on the machine.

A pickup with a full load of firewood comes up the county road, and I look at the firewood once and then twice. I dress, walk out, start my pickup, and drive down the road. Sure enough, my firewood is gone. I turn around, drive back, park the truck in the driveway, and walk up to the truck with the load of firewood.

The driver of the pickup rolls down his window to see what I want. The guy on the passenger side reads a Playboy magazine. He doesn't look at me after his first brief glance.

"Where'd you guys get this wood?"

"We cut it down the road a ways."

"Down by Antler Guard Station."

"Down that way."

"No use playing around about it. I know where you cut it, and most of it, you didn't cut. All you had to do was back in and load it. What you had to cut was down and limbed already. It didn't take you half an hour to cut it up."

"I don't think you could prove that."

“This isn’t a court of law, where I have to prove anything to anybody. You know and I know what happened. Day before yesterday, I spent most of the day packing a road through the snow, dropping the trees, and cutting the wood up. Yesterday, I was too sick to go get the rest of it, and you saw it and loaded it and figured you had some free wood for very little work, but that isn’t the way it’s going to go. Either you drive into the barn and unload the wood, and I’ll give you a few bucks for your work, or you pay me for the wood.”

His reaction surprised me. He said, “How much do you want for it?”

Probably, they wouldn’t have stolen wood that had clear ownership, and probably that’s why he capitulated with no further discussion. I said, “Twenty dollars. It’s worth more, but you did some of the work, so I’ll settle for twenty.”

He said, “I only have ten dollars.” He turned to his companion. “How much do you have?”

“I have five.”

“Okay. I’ll settle for fifteen.”

They gave me fifteen dollars, and I said thanks and walked, shaky legged from the last effects of illness and from the last effects of anger that had driven me through the beginning of our conversation, back to the house.

About fifteen minutes later, the men got the machine loaded and the road clear, and the wood went down the highway. I started thinking the whole series of events was funny. I laughed about it and forgave the men for grabbing an opportunity and myself for getting so angry. Fifteen dollars wasn’t nearly as much as I could have sold the wood for in town, but I wasn’t out the gas for hauling it nor the time it would have taken to finish cutting it up and to load it, haul it, and unload it.

December brought the coldest weather we ever had. We bring in our drinking water in one-gallon plastic jugs and leave them on the floor by the south wall in the kitchen. With the kitchen stove burning all night, twenty feet from the jugs, the water froze solid. We had to put the jugs up on the table at night to have water available to drink.

When the outside temperature is forty-five degrees below zero, I prowl the house after midnight and feed the stoves. Twice, from across the meadow, over in the timber, I hear a sharp explosion. I think the sound comes from the sap in a tree freezing, expanding, and causing the tree to burst.

When Juniper and Amanda are warm enough, they stretch out straight in their beds. If either of them bunches up into a tight ball, I put another blanket over her. They are hardier than we adults, probably because they've lived most of their lives in this cold country. I get into bed several times and sleep for fifteen minutes or half an hour. I'm glad we insulated this back room.

Laura sleeps on the side of the bed closest to the stove, about ten feet from the stove. She wears long underwear, socks, pajamas, and a hat. When I get into bed, I wear two layer, cotton and wool long underwear, wool socks, and a wool cap. With a down comforter over us, four blankets, and two heavy bedspreads, it isn't too cold, as long as we don't change positions. If I turn, I'm in part of the bed that isn't warmed up, and it takes a while to warm up the new part. Usually, I don't catch naps through the night, but I'm still fighting off effects of the flu or whatever it was, and my energy runs low.

The second winter we lived in Whitney Valley, the temperature fell to about thirty-five below zero. Laura and I slept soundly when Juniper called out, loud and clear, "Head

is cold! Bring hat!” I don’t worry about her getting cold and not letting us know about it. Even when she was a baby, if she got cold, she would call out, “Hey!” in a very loud voice. I watch Amanda more closely. I’m not sure she will call out if she gets too cold while she’s sleeping.

Christmas eve, the temperature fell to fifty-six below zero. Laura stayed up late, so I went to bed and slept in preparation for my nightly prowls once she quit. Eleven o’clock, she came into the back room and said, “Jon, someone’s knocking at the door.” I got up fast. I knew it was already about forty-five below.

I opened the door, and the man went directly to the heater, stood close to it, and held his arms and hands above it. “My truck quit up here at the intersection. My wife and kids are up in the truck.”

“Go get your family and bring them down. It’s too cold to sit in a truck with no heater.” I knew it was hard for him to get away from the stove, but what he’d already done and gotten desperate for heat doing, walking here, they still had to do, and they were cooling down waiting for him, so I said again, “Go get your family.”

“Yeah. I’m going to.” But he still leaned over the heater.

I pushed him away from the stove and said, “Go get your family.” He walked out of the house and up the road and brought them back. Parents and children walked briskly. The moon shone deadly cold on white snow. The man, woman, boy, and girl bunched up around the stove. They wore western Oregon clothing, cowboy boots, tennis shoes, jeans, and light jackets.

He drives a new, one-ton truck, diesel. He stopped in Prairie City. They had winterized fuel, but their pump froze, and they couldn’t get the fuel out of the ground. It’s so cold,

the fuel in his truck jelled and wouldn't feed into the motor. The truck ran rough coming over the mountain, starved out, got a little fuel and then starved out again, until it died, and he coasted to the intersection. He saw smoke coming from our chimney and walked to the house.

I said, "God must be taking care of you and your family, because if you'd been a few miles up the road, you probably wouldn't have made it." The way he looked at me, I think he expected me to preach him a sermon. I already had.

We dug out every spare pad and cover and placed the people with the bedding around the living room heater. I slept for a while and then prowled the house, feeding heaters, slept for a while, and prowled the house. I had to step over guests to feed the heater. I kept it roaring.

We ate breakfast early, all eight of us. Laura said later it bothered her that none of the people pitched in and helped with the stove, the breakfast, or the dishes. I said, "Maybe they didn't know what to do in the alien environment of a kitchen with a woodstove and a pitcher pump."

The father of the family and I walked down to the phone house in morning sunlight reflecting brilliantly from snow. It was still too cold to be out, but a short walk and a quick call was bearable.

Scott walked down from his place and wanted help starting his pickup. I said, "I think it's a useless exercise to even try, but you can use my torch." I showed him how to set the burning torch in a stovepipe on the ground under the engine. "Unless you block most of the air movement, it won't do you much good. There's cardboard and sheet metal in the barn, but unless it's an emergency, you're on your own. It's too cold to be out long."

The man's brother drove up and took the family of four

and their truck onward in their journey. As they left, the father extended a twenty dollar bill toward me.

“No. I don’t want it. Thanks.”

“Well, you’re out food and time and firewood. I would have happily taken any available motel and paid more than that for it.”

“Thanks, but I don’t want it. I like to think people help each other all they can. If you feel you owe, help somebody who needs help. Keep passing it on.”

I almost said, “Next time, carry extra clothing, food, and wood for a fire.” But I figured he must know that, now.

A few days later, on their way back over the mountain, they stopped by. It was warmer, though still below zero. He got out of the truck and motioned to his load, about twenty bales of alfalfa hay. He said, “I threw on three bales for your goat.”

“I appreciate the thought, but I have plenty of hay for the winter.”

“Looks like I’m not going to be able to give you anything.”

“It does look like that.”

“I guess I’ll have to be satisfied with just saying thank you.”

“That’s sufficient.”

He reached his hand toward me, and we shook.

“Take care.”

“You too. Be careful.”

It warmed up after the first of the year and softened the snow. Then it dropped to 25 below zero and froze a hard crust on the snow. We ate breakfast, and we finished a few small projects in the house. The sun shone. I walked out onto the front porch and looked at the thermometer. “It’s up to a

toasty ten below and rising,” I said. “Let’s put on a bunch of clothes and see if the crust will support us for a walk across the meadow.”

We walked down and crossed the frozen river. Even at five below zero, sunshine warmed us, so we left part of our outer clothing hanging in willow bushes by the river and walked across the meadow to the timber. We sat on stumps in sunshine, rested and talked, and then we headed back toward home.

Amanda wandered away from the rest of us, seemingly walking aimlessly. After a few minutes, she stopped, turned around, looked at the rest of us, and laughed. Laura asked, “What are you doing?”

“Walking with my eyes closed. It’s fun. Try it.”

So we all tried it.

The smooth surface of the snow makes walking easy. Snow fills all the ditches and levels the ground. On the open meadow, we can walk a long way without bumping into any fences or willows or falling over a river bank.

This is a wonderful feeling, this walking without seeing where we’re going. We drift away from one another but keep fairly close by sound. Closer to the river, Juniper suggests taking turns, one walking with eyes closed and one guiding, and we get through gates of two fences that way. We adults guide our children through the willows, down the river bank, across the river, and up the opposite bank. “Turn left. More. More yet. Straight ahead. You’re going to go down the steep bank to the river now. Stop. There’s a willow bush in front of you. Turn right. More. That’s it. Down the bank. You’re on the river, with a steep bank ahead of you. You’re going to have to step high to get started up the bank.”

We cross the river to open, level ground again. I say,

“Let’s have a footrace with our eyes closed.”

“A footrace?”

“Sure. Three race while one watches and calls out if anyone races into danger. Let’s head for that high ground and see where we wind up.”

Laura will watch for the first race. We line up, and she says go, and we go. I’ve never felt anything quite like this before. Full speed ahead. I know I’m lifting my feet much higher than I need to as I run, but it seems to be how I have to do it. I think I’m headed for high ground. My daughters’ laughter drifts away to one side of me. I think they stick together by sound, but I let them go, and I head where I think I should go.

Laura calls to us, one by one, to stop. When she calls me, I stop and wonder what I’m facing. I don’t want to open my eyes, but I open them. I’m amazed that I’m standing on the river bank.

For an instant, I think I’ve never before seen anything I see now; the river bank falls sharply in front of me; ice caps the river; snow has drifted in windy patterns on the ice; leafless willow bushes stand along the river; the snow-covered meadow lies silent across the river; a black raven lands on brilliant white snow.

I turn and look behind me. Apparently, I started for high ground but bore left until I came half a circle back to the river. Juniper faces the river a hundred yards downstream. Amanda ran closer to straight, and she faces a fence on higher ground. Spread out across crusted snow, with clear winter sunshine filling the air between us, we all laugh together. More. More of this, we say. But we’re tired, and it’s time to go home and get something to eat, and that’s what we do, saying tomorrow, we’ll do it again.

But a chinook blows up the valley at daylight. The temperature jumps fifty degrees in fifteen minutes, and the crust on the surface of the snow softens. Walking anywhere on snow means sinking hip deep. We don't complain about the sudden change in weather. We walk out in light clothing and hike four abreast down the plowed county road in warm sunshine. We look at the beautiful world around us. We wonder aloud how soon the ice on the river will break up. We each guess a date, and we agree to watch the river so we'll know whose guess comes closest.

Far down the road, we turn and start back. We get home in time to see the snow on the barn roof give up its bond with the metal, slip down with a loud rumble, and pile beneath the eaves.

Cold times and warmer times alternate until early spring comes to Whitney Valley. The birds begin to come back. Green grass grows in the warmer seep areas. The valley breaks free of winter in a terrific rush, and I'm glad it does. Spring is beautiful here in the valley and full of adventure, but already I'm planning for next winter, when we'll have a firm crust on the snow. I know where a person, walking with eyes closed, with a minimum of guidance, can walk three miles without obstruction. Then we can open our eyes to one of those rare moments when we don't know where we are, and the world is new again.

Gardening Where Few Dare

April 18. Whitney Valley has been very good for us. According to the numbers I read, our monetary income is still well below the poverty level. We don't own much. We have the pickup I bought from Guy, which is now in good shape. Laura's mother gave Laura a '73 sedan, with air conditioning and a tape deck, which has given her freedom she needed to go where she wants or needs to go even when I'm using the pickup for work. Laura, Juniper, and Amanda go to church in Baker much more than they did before they had the car. I go with them sometimes. We attend more concerts in Baker than we did before we had dependable transportation.

Monetary poverty means little. I think of Jim touching his forehead and saying, "My treasure's in here." Yes. And I would touch my chest and add, "and in here." We have had rich experience with the earth, with wildlife, with a closely-knit, deeply-supportive family. Infinite material wealth can't buy the wealth of meaning and the sense of positive fulfillment that comes from our experiences.

Amanda's and Juniper's education has gone well. They know far more than I did at their age. They know far more than most people I know did at their age. The desire to keep learning consumes them. They're happy, with a cohesive, sensible view of the world. They're both very creative. I admire their ability to apply critical thought to everything they encounter, their ability to think through their relationship to the world around them and make sense of it.

Laura still encounters people who attack her verbally and accuse her of negligence for taking the responsibility for educating her own children. Her confidence in our ability to

take care of most of our daughters' education within our family isn't strong enough to withstand these sometimes vociferous, vitriolic attacks without emotional upset. I've become good at wiping away tears, reassuring her, and helping her regain confidence that what we are doing is for the greatest good of our family and for each member of the family. I say, "The people who attack you haven't even known you five minutes. They don't know who you are. They don't know what we're doing here. You need to remember they aren't really attacking you. They're reacting to their own thoughtless prejudices.

"They attack you because they're afraid they've chosen wrong for their own children. They've chosen the paths the culture dictates, a house, a new car, a wealth of material goods. Suddenly, they're looking at someone who's doing it completely differently. Suddenly, they're afraid, 'Maybe we've done it wrong. Maybe we chose the wrong values. Maybe we haven't given our children the best we could give them, because we allowed the consumer culture to sell us a shallow set of values.'

"They can't face that fear. They can't deal with those questions about their own lives, so they lash out at you to blot out the fear, the questions about how they've chosen directions for their own lives. Why else would people who would walk by an adult striking a child and never interfere because it isn't any of their business jump in feet first and total fury the instant they hear we're educating our own children, when they haven't any idea what we're doing, whether it's working well or not, whether our children are getting a good education or not?"

I often regretted that Laura was the one people attacked verbally, rather than me. She was the one most in contact

with people. Then again, it might have been best that I didn't meet these people and receive their anger, since I had little inclination to cloak my certainty about what we were doing in diplomacy, to cloak my angry reaction to their uncalled for reactions in careful, well-tempered responses. It's easy to say I'm against violence, but escalation of verbal fury in a discussion of how we raise and educate our children could land me in the middle of violence, with nothing at all achieved.

We're ahead of our time. We'll hear of more and more people who teach their own children, and we'll see growing acceptance of the practice, but the numbers are few so far, and acceptance is thin and widely spaced.

Wind roars down the mountain, whistles, and pounds across the valley. Loose metal on the shop roof slaps up and down. I should nail it down, but it's too windy to get up there. When the wind dies, the metal won't make noise, and I probably won't think about and fix it during those calm times.

None of us want to be outdoors in the cold wind. Thirty-two is the high temperature all day. The sun shines now and then. Clouds scatter from Greenhorn, then bunch up over the valley, and it looks like we will get rain or snow, but so far, no precipitation. After lunch, I walk through the garden area. I've landscaped and raked. The garden is ready to plant, but I'm not in a rush about it. Some crops, seeded now, will germinate, but they won't grow much until it warms up.

Last winter, I promised Juniper I would add a room to the house, spring and summer. She needs her own room. I start digging a hole south of the south wall of the house. It seems to me the easiest and most conservative way to build another room is to dig most of the room, then line it with rocks. I'll

use the excavated dirt to build the walls higher. I'll build windows into the width of the south and west walls, at the tops of the walls.

Building the room into the ground will set the roof of the room low enough to join the rest of the house under the south window of the kitchen, so the room doesn't cut off any light that shines into the house. A subterranean room will be easy to heat. I can use the shape of the dirt and the rocks I line it with to make beds, shelves, and places to sit. I can get enough free, used metal roofing to roof the room. I can use beetle-killed lodgepole for the structural wood.

I hauled in more rocks for landscaping the garden the first year we lived here than I needed. If I use big rocks to brace the dirt, I won't need much mortar to bind the rocks together to seal the inside of the room. I'll build a wood-burning heater into the dirt and rock structure of the north wall, so the heater is under the part of the house already there, and it will help heat the rest of the house.

I don't make drawings of what I intend to build. I don't take very many measurements. The hole I dig and the rocks I line it with will define the room. I'll bring everything into square when I've built the walls high enough to add the wood-framed top of the room. I move big, flat rocks close to where I'm working and into the part of the hole I've dug deep enough. I start building the walls and part of the floor. I still need to move a lot of dirt.

I think if I get the room well started and then tell John about it, and if he looks at it and sees the sense of the structure, he'll say go ahead with it, and I might be able to get him to pay for whatever materials I have to buy.

We'll garden the mound of earth under the windows of the new room. We'll landscape the room and the garden together.

I'll build a small exit into the garden from high in the southeast corner of the room, and I'll build another exit from the room into the house.

I started this garden that I now visualize blending into the structure of the house two days before we moved to Whitney. I drove out, spaded ground, and removed grass from the surface. Northeastern Oregon has a short growing season and frequent summer frosts, but I intended to grow as much of our food as I could. I hoped to grow enough that we could sell some produce. Selling produce never happened, but we had plenty for our own use, and we gave vegetables to friends and relatives.

After we moved, I worked manure and hay into the ground, added dolomite, watered it heavily, let it stand a few days, and planted. I planted vegetables that withstood some frost. I planted fifty strawberry plants, four dozen raspberry plants and thirty-two fruit trees, all of the fruit trees varieties advertised as very hardy, including cherries, plums, apricots, and apples.

During the beginning of fall's cold weather, I covered the garden with hay. All through our first winter in Whitney Valley, I walked out to the garden, shoveled the snow aside, moved the hay, and harvested carrots, onions, kale, and lettuce and then covered the garden again. When warm weather of spring melted the snow from Whitney Valley, we were still eating fresh vegetables from the garden.

The second year, I planted large areas and covered them with hay when cold weather started. We harvested and stored vegetables in the keep house, and I didn't begin to dig through snow and hay after vegetables until well into winter. Voles, mice, ground squirrels, gophers, some or all, had discovered the bounty and had been harvesting. I found only

three or four pounds of carrots, a few onions, three bulbs of garlic, no lettuce, no kale.

We already had two cats, but when Laura, Juniper, and Amanda came home from a trip to town, told me about two cats needing a home, and asked me if they could bring them home, I said, “Sure. Bring them home. Maybe they’ll thin the rodent population so we can keep vegetables in the garden in the winter.”

People abandoned cats along the road. Winter settled into the valley, and cats showed up at our door and asked for help making it through hard times. Cats had kittens. By the time snow began to fall, we had eighteen cats, more than I wanted in my most generous moods. Laura set up feeding stations on the back porch and in the shop out behind the house. She cooked stews of leftovers, grains, whatever we had, to feed the cats. We didn’t have money enough to feed them store-bought cat food. They immediately ate what she cooked for them.

She put several boxes with rags in them in the shop for cats to sleep in. We allowed only a favored few in the house. I’m sure it seemed unfair to the outdoor cats, but allowing more than a few in led to cat fights and other messy problems in the house. We had messy problems around the house and shop anyway, since the cats wouldn’t go far from their shelter, and there was nothing to dig in but snow. When the snow melted, it was an odoriferous place for a while, but we still had vegetables in the garden.

We thinned the ranks. The people at the animal shelter said they could usually place kittens in homes, so we left some of the kittens there. We gave cats to anyone who would take them. Some cats left voluntarily. Spring puts voles, mice, and ground squirrels into action, and some of the cats

were more willing to try to make it on their own than to stay in a place where there were so many cats.

Half the fruit trees and three fourths of the raspberry plants died the first winter. One crabapple tree and two raspberry plants survived the second winter.

After the next winter, we had one fruit tree and no raspberry plants. Only the trunk and two branches of the crabapple tree lived. The next winter, which dropped to fifty-six degrees below zero, killed the rest of the tree.

Strawberry plants did well, but frost settled into Whitney Valley often through the summer, and strawberry blossoms frosted and wouldn't set fruit. Sometimes the time between frosts was just right, and we harvested a few ripe berries. Amanda and Juniper, impressed by a bowlful of berries from the garden asked me to plant more. I said, "I will if you'll help me with it."

Juniper said, "Sure. We'll help."

We hauled manure and decomposing hay, and I tilled two thousand, five hundred square feet across the driveway from the house. We cut runners from the plants we already had and thinned mature plants and planted all of them in the newly tilled area. The plants thrived. We watered them thoroughly and mulched them heavily with rain-spoiled hay just before I had to shut the ditches off for haying, and the plants came through dry off in fine shape.

In August of the new strawberry bed's second year, I thought we had well over a gallon of ripe berries on the plants. Pick them tomorrow, I thought, when they're at the peak of ripeness. The temperature dropped to sixteen degrees that night, August 18, and the berries froze and were no good. The frost killed the blossoms and ruined the developing fruit. There wasn't time for another crop to mature, even if the

weather was ideal.

I let Jewel eat that strawberry patch, and I trimmed our other patches.

There are techniques that can help trees and shrubs make it through severe winters, but we also face frosts every month of the year. Trees surviving the winters would be unlikely to set fruit, so I didn't replant.

Cloche gardening protects plants from light frosts. I thought of building a greenhouse so we could grow tomatoes, peppers, melons, and other frost-sensitive plants, but I can only achieve a finite amount of work after ranch work, cutting firewood, helping teach and raise the girls, and writing.

We grow fine carrots, cabbages, onions, garlic, lettuce, spinach, kale, kohlrabi, beets, parsley. Peas about half the time. Sometimes a heavy frost comes and kills the peas, but I always plant them and hope.

We lost the garden to grasshoppers one year, late in the summer, though I don't blame the loss on the grasshoppers. I cut hay too many hours every day. I couldn't bring water down the ditch, because it seeped through the banks out onto the meadow, and the meadow had to stay dry until we finished haying. I dug a well near the garden, but the pump I had then was very difficult to prime. Laura couldn't manage it at all, and only with a lot of work was I ever able to get it pumping. So we hauled and siphoned water from the kitchen, and we didn't get enough water to the garden.

Where there are other things to eat, grasshoppers won't eat thoroughly watered plants. But if a garden dries out, they will attack in force, and that's what they did, until we didn't have any garden. Where onions had grown, the grasshoppers left perfect, onion-shaped holes. They ate every surface crop

level with the ground. They ate roots of any size two or three inches into the ground.

The next year, I didn't plant a garden. I had plenty of work to do, and feeding the grasshoppers once seemed like enough. All summer, every time I walked through the garden area, I felt sad, and I missed the vegetables, especially the carrots and lettuce.

So the next year, I bought a small, self-priming pump. I discovered a spring above the barn that fed the ditch into the garden enough water to help keep the garden irrigated even during dry off. I planted a small area, where I had built up excellent soil, close to the house, and we had a productive garden. We still had to overcome problems, but that is as it should be when gardening in northeastern Oregon. We had all the vegetables we could eat.

I dig more dirt and place more rocks for the new room, but irrigation work is urgent. I have fence to repair, garden to plant, and wood to cut. I don't want to rush the new room anyway. When I have a week or two clear, I'll put enough form to it so it shows what I'm going to do.

Allegories from the Meadows

Juniper and Amanda often go with me, one at a time, when I ride the motorcycle to irrigate the meadow or repair fence. I started taking them with me as soon as they understood the importance of keeping their grip around me as they rode, and they understood that early. They love to ride, and they've explored a lot of the ranch by going along on some of my projects.

Whoever is with me stays by me as I work, and we talk, or she explores the area on foot, staying within sight of me. We see birds, animals, wildflowers, and the forest above the meadow, where the big ditch runs down through timber and spreads water across the south meadow. We journey through sparser forest and sage brush along the north and east boundaries of the ranch, where ridges rise from the valley toward mountain peaks. We see, hear, and smell some of the inhabitants of those areas.

Amanda told me she built an allegory about those journeys on the motorcycle. The meadow represented life. Bumps and jolts were trials and tribulations. She had to hang on, get over the rough spots, and continue on a steady course. Biting flies and mosquitoes tried to make her let go of her chosen course through life, but she knew she had to hang on through all the distractions to see the beauty, to be ready for the new experiences ahead of her.

She said enduring the biting flies, mosquitoes, and rough spots rewarded her, because she had so much fun journeying on the motorcycle and being out on the meadow. She liked to watch me irrigate. She really liked watching me dig the rich, dark mud from ditches and place it to direct the water where I

wanted it to go on the meadow.

Juniper enjoyed going with me, too, but our journeys didn't always take us into the ideally idyllic. Revising a ditch with a shovel can take a while. The ride here and there across the meadow held the most interest for Juniper. Sometimes she became impatient to be on our way to other projects or to return home if she had nothing to do but wait for me to finish my project.

The summer of her sixth year, early one morning, I told Juniper, "Today, I have to repair a washed-out bank in a big ditch. I'll be working in one place for a long time. It's your turn to go with me, if you want to, but you've been getting bored if we stay in one place for long. I think you'll get bored, and I'll have to bring you home before I finish. I don't want to leave the job until I'm through with it."

"I won't be bored. I'll wait until you're through."

She really did want to go. I said, "Okay. You can go, but you have to be cheerful about it and keep smiling."

"Okay. I will," she said.

We crossed the river at the ford, crossed the meadow, and rode up into the timber, to the big ditch. I shoveled dirt into the washed-out bank and walked on it to pack it into place. Juniper explored the area around us. Then she sat on a log close to where I worked. We talked some as I worked, and then we were quiet. After a while, I asked, "How are you doing?"

"Fine," she said. Her cheerfulness sounded forced. I looked up from my shoveling. Mosquitoes had landed all over her. More mosquitoes hovered in the air close around her, waiting for space to land. She smiled, but she obviously had to work at it.

I dropped my shovel, ran to her, and brushed away

mosquitoes. I said, "Let's ride across the meadow just to see what we can see, then head for home."

"Are you through working already?"

"For now I am. That's enough for today."

Mosquitoes had come to remind me, ditches can always be repaired. Moments of joy together are precious. We rode up the meadow and looked at the beaver dam in a ditch near the west boundary and the pond spread out through the willows behind it. I told Juniper about the beaver I saw swimming in the pond. We looked at birds and flowers and grasses alive with spring on the meadow.

Sometimes I take Amanda or Juniper with me when I ride the motorcycle to outlying fences to make sure the fences are still in good shape. We make small repairs where necessary. Whoever is with me helps sometimes, pulls a wire to where I can reach it, brings me tools, clears down posts out of the way.

I finish almost all the fence work. It's time to dry off again; we're going to cut hay soon. Beavers built seven dams along Camp Creek. To get some of the meadow dried off enough to support machinery to cut, bale, and haul hay, I lower the level of the beaver ponds and keep them low enough that water doesn't spill onto the meadow. That won't be too hard, because only a little water comes down the creek this late in the year.

After we finished haying last year, I brought the backhoe over, dug out the dams, and deepened the creek channel. For many years, irrigation workers tore out dams, and beavers rebuilt dams, so limbs, leaves, woodchips, mud, and gravel washed downstream and settled. High, powerful spring runoff carried gravel down from the mountain, across the Hale's ranch, and filled channels.

Willows grew wide all along the creek. Shallow channels wandered through the willows. In some places, the channel filled completely. High water spread where it would. Beavers and gravel washed down by the stream could make the area into as much marsh as Camp Creek would supply, and it would be all right with me, but it would mean the end of haying a large area, and that isn't all right with John Rouse.

Some say, get the beavers out of there and end all the problems. I say, get the beavers out of there, and the creek will cut a deep channel with high, fast water of spring run off. Raising summer water high enough in the deep channel to spill onto the fields will become a major project. John is wiser than many ranchers. He gives a trapper permission to trap, but he says don't take them all. The trapper doesn't want to take them all, even if he could. He hopes to trap the area again in two or three years.

When I deepened the channel and the ponds, I improved the beavers' habitat. They have new depth to build dams and lodges, and they have more underwater space. I leave more water in the ponds now than I could before I dug, and they don't spill over by the next morning.

Juniper is twelve this year, and Amanda is ten. They would like to make some money. Juniper would like to buy a violin. Amanda wants to buy a piano. I say, "Take the beaver dams out for me every morning, and I'll pay you."

We walk up the county road, across the highway, and across part of the Camp Creek meadow. We climb over willow bush limbs, squeeze under, struggle through densely growing willows to get to the dams farthest downstream. I show them how to take out beaver dams. "Pull the biggest branches out by hand and throw them up on the bank. When there's a bunch of little stuff free, work the fork under it and

pitch it up onto the bank. When you have enough of the sticks out so you can dig with the shovel, throw the mud up there. You can tell what's the new part. Just dig it out to there. That leaves the beavers plenty of water for living. They don't have enough water to rebuild every dam every night, so start at the lowest dam and just work on the ones they've repaired."

We work our way through willows up Camp Creek, and we take out beaver dams as we go.

Halfway through the third dam, Amanda says, "It's too hot and muddy and hard, and the mud stinks. I don't want to do it."

Juniper says, "I do." She pulls limbs from the dams, throws them up on the bank, pitchforks smaller limbs, and shovels mud.

After the third dam, we check dams farther up the creek, but the beavers haven't repaired them. I say, "That's all for today. Let's see if we can get out of the willows." We leave Camp Creek behind us. We walk through tall grass to the edge of the irrigated area, where lower, sparser grass grows between bushes of sage, and we walk down the field toward home.

Halfway home, Amanda says, "But I won't have a way to earn money."

I say, "No cause for alarm. We'll find something for you to do so you can earn money."

When we get home, we confer with Laura. She says, "Usually, you and Juniper do the dishes together. You could do all the dishes and help me with other chores around the house, and we can pay you for that."

Amanda says, "I don't like the idea that my work is all going to be, quote, woman's work, unquote."

I say, "Well, there are beaver dams to take out. Once we

get the hay cut, I'll be cutting firewood, and you can go to work with me and pile limbs and load firewood, and I'll pay you for that."

Amanda says, "But the dishes have to be washed and everything else here has to be taken care of, so I think I'll learn to be content with that, even if it is woman's work. After all, I am on my way to being a woman, and I'm going to do the work by my own choice."

Every summer morning, Juniper walks up the county road, crosses the highway, and walks through tall grass to where she left the shovel and the pitchfork the day before. She picks up her tools and removes beaver dams. She sticks with the work all through dry off and all through haying season, until the contractor loads the hay bales and hauls them off the field. By then, she has a good start on money for a violin.

Amanda sticks with washing dishes and helping Laura with household chores. Often, I come in from outdoor work and find her working at the sink or at other chores. She hums songs, many of her own invention. She sings complex, romantic songs of imagination or songs about animals, birds, and nature around us.

By the time winter hits and snow drifts down into the valley, the beavers have had water long enough to fill all their ponds and get ready for winter, and the girls have a start on money for musical instruments.

Farewell John; Farewell Whitney Valley

It looks to me like a really good crop of hay grows everywhere on the meadow. All the improvements I've worked into the irrigation system over the years bear obvious fruit this year. When we finish cutting the hay, when Wayne's crew bales it, hauls it, and stacks it at John's home ranch, when John knows how much hay came off the ranch, I'll say, "John, we need more living space. Come on around back, if you will, and I'll show you what I have planned." I'll show him the cheapest, most materially conservative way to add living space to the house.

We almost left Whitney last year. Late fall, we packed everything we could take with us in the car and pickup and drove to northern California, with plans to caretake a place for free rent and to make our way as we could. I didn't plan to tell John we were leaving until we knew we could successfully locate down there. I wanted to hold onto the job in case we needed it.

We sold Candy, Amanda and Juniper's pony, to a rancher, Dan, who brought a stock truck to pick her up. John drove up the road, saw us loading the pony, drove into the corral, and got out of his pickup. He and Dan said howdy and talked about what's going on in ranching and in the world while I tied Candy up short to the headboard. Then I asked Dan, "Are you satisfied with how I've tied her?"

"Yes. That'll be all right. I'm going to drive slow."

I climbed down from the truck and went over to where Dan and John talked. Dan handed me two twenties and a ten. He said, "Well, I'd better be on my way. Good luck to you down there in California or wherever you go."

That was the first John had heard about it. Later, Laura said, “John looked like he’d been hit.”

He did. He stepped back and leaned on the front of his pickup. After Dan drove away and Laura and the girls headed back for the house, I told John, “Sorry I didn’t tell you about it sooner, but it isn’t for sure, and I thought I’d wait until we’re sure. We want to see if we can line something up. Whitney has been a really good place for us, but Laura would like plumbing and electricity. I wouldn’t mind it myself if it came down to it. The girls need more opportunities for cultural events. We need to be closer to someplace with more going on.”

“Sure. I could see where you might need that.”

“I know two people who want the job. If we decide to move for sure, I’ll send them to talk to you.”

“That would be fine, Jon. I’d appreciate that.”

We drove to California. The free rent place in California turned out to be unworkable. The land around was littered with garbage, and dry, fire-susceptible brush grew densely on the hill. I said, “This is a fire trap. If this brush ever caught fire, we couldn’t get out of here.”

Laura said, “We couldn’t live in this tiny trailer. This isn’t at all like Lynn said it was.”

That evening, back at Laura’s mother’s house, we talked about plans. Laura said, “All the reasons for moving down here still make sense, if we can find a way to live here. I think I should check job and rental possibilities here.”

I said, “I think I should go back to Whitney and cut firewood. Whatever we decide to do, we’re going to need money, and I can be making money there while you see what’s possible here.”

Laura’s investigation in California turned up low-paying

jobs and high rent. Even though she had not settled there, officials threatened her with legal action if she didn't immediately put Juniper and Amanda into public school, something we didn't intend to do even if we did move to California. Our approach to education worked too well to turn them over to the uncertain methods of public schooling. Some unidentified friend or acquaintance had panicked at the idea that we might raise intelligent, educated, independent children without public schooling and had reported Laura, Amanda, and Juniper to the authorities.

Laura, Juniper, and Amanda came home to Whitney Valley. Nights had turned cold. Some days, the sun shone on meadows gone sere, and the days warmed up. Some days clouded and stayed cold. Elk and deer browsed the meadow. Migratory birds had flown south. Cold fall winds sang of winter approaching rapidly.

Hours after they arrived home from California, Amanda and Juniper heard Laura and me talking and Amanda asked, "Do you mean we're staying here? We're not moving to Chico or Willows?"

I said, "Yes. That's what we mean. I thought you already knew that."

Juniper said, "We're staying here? All winter?"

"All winter and probably all next spring and summer, at least. Once I start ranch work, I'll finish the season. We might live here a long while yet."

"Yay. Yippee. Whooppee. Yay. Hooray." They stampeded, if two can make a stampede, and it sounded to me like two can, through the house, back through the house, out the front door, around the yard, over to the barn, galloping wider and wider circles as they encompassed their entire known territory and maybe some new territory besides with

“Hello.”

“Hello. Hello. Hello. We said goodbye, though it made us cry, but now Hello, and let’s dance and run and shout with celebrations and congratulations, and hello, we’re home. We’re home. We’re home.”

Laura had been subjected to some of the pressures of modern urban existence, and she came back determined to really see and appreciate the mountain valley where we lived.

When I found out we were staying, I asked John if it would be worth a raise if I stayed. He said, “Sure, but I can’t give you very much. How much would you need?”

“Fifty dollars a month.”

“That would be fine.”

“I use my pickup quite a bit for ranch work. Fifty dollars a month rent on that.”

“That would be fine, too.”

I did it wrong; I saw that the instant it was too late to matter. But that is what I said, and that is what he said.

I should have said, “Two hundred a month raise in salary and a hundred and fifty a month for the truck.” Then, if he wanted to talk me down, he could work at that, and I wouldn’t have had to wonder what he would have come through with if I’d really pushed. He knew I was a valuable part of his cattle business, and I shouldn’t have been so easy about pricing myself. But I had other things in mind. Like, when the time was right, saying, “I want to add a room. The materials won’t cost much, but I want you to pay for them.” I wanted him to feel like there was still some slack to take up.

I told John, “When we cut hay, I can’t put in ten and twelve hour days anymore. We’ll have to get a relief driver up here so I can have three or four hours off through the middle of the day, and then I’ll drive late.”

He said, “That’d be fine.”

I knew I’d have to remind him when we started cutting hay. He wouldn’t push a man to work more hours than he’d agreed to work, but if a relief driver didn’t show up and a man drove long hours because he wanted to keep from slowing down the baling crew, he wouldn’t object to that.

That winter was a very good winter for us in Whitney Valley. Every winter had been a good winter, but realization of what existence might be like in busier, more commercial, more densely-populated areas had heightened our appreciation of where and how we lived.

That winter gave way to spring, spring to summer, summer to dry meadows, ready for cutting hay. I started cutting hay.

Jim had journeyed out into the world, Montana to fall timber and build roads, The Grand Canyon to work on a mule train carrying people down into the canyon and back out.

Cody drove up from the home ranch and ran the other swather parts of the first two days. John drove up toward the end of the second day to see how we were doing. I said, “John, we’d better have a relief driver so we can keep these things cutting hay longer every day.”

John said, “We’d better wait and see when Wayne shows up and starts baling the hay. He said it might be Wednesday, but he could get held up where he’s working. We don’t want to get too far ahead. If the hay dries out too much, it loses food value.”

The hydraulic pump on the gas swather broke, and that swather sat, waiting for parts. I drove the diesel machine from shortly after daylight until about ten o’clock. Cody drove up the river road and ran the swather until four, and then I cut hay until dark. We took time to sharpen sickle bars,

fuel up, and service the machine.

A salesman from a farm machinery dealership brought up a new swather. He wanted to demonstrate it to a customer who would come up and cut some hay with it. When the salesman saw one of our swathers sat disabled, he suggested we use the new swather a few days and get some hay cut. I think he hoped to sell John a machine, though John made it clear his hand wasn't going near his check book.

All of us used the new machine. It was an exceptionally rough-riding machine, but it sure did cut hay. We took turns getting beat to pieces while we pushed that shiny new machine at high speed over a lot of ground, leaving neatly windrowed hay behind it.

A hydraulic line on the diesel machine broke, and hydraulic fluid sprayed all over five or six tons of hay, though I didn't know anything about it until the header wouldn't come up when I pushed the lever that normally raised it. I looked for why and discovered a break in a hydraulic line. I laid up in the shade of the willows while Cody drove to Baker to get a new hydraulic line and fluid. I watched ravens and hawks land and look for small animals that didn't get out of the way of the swather in time. I greased the swather, then went home for a while. Cody got back early afternoon. We repaired the machine and cut more hay.

I told John about the contaminated hay, but it got raked and baled, and eventually, fed to the cattle anyway. The hydraulic oil is just one of several contaminants the machines give to the hay. Exhaust fumes settle on the hay. Oil and grease drips onto the hay.

John Hayes drove the new swather up the Camp Creek field and got stuck in the mud along the edge of the marsh. I tried to pull the swather out of the mud with the other

swather, but it didn't come. Then we tried the winch on my pickup, but the pickup just slid toward the swather.

John Rouse drove up the river road to see how the haying progressed. I asked him to back his pickup to mine. I chained the trailer hitches together, and we sat with eight wheels braked while I pulled with a hundred feet of cable. John Hayes poured the power on in his swather. He churned through mud wheel deep, until he reduced the wheel speed, crawled up onto the surface, and drove onto dry ground. I unhooked the pickups and rewound my cable.

John Rouse drove away down the field in his pickup and up onto the highway, headed for the phone cabin. He usually sat down in there and took a nap, early afternoon, the days he was up at the Whitney ranch. The day was slipping by, so he didn't take his nap. He drove toward Baker. Up near Juniper Flat, he fell asleep at the wheel, drove off the road, and hit three trees.

Relatives who saw him in the hospital said he was embarrassed. He said it was a dumb thing to do, fall asleep and get in a wreck like that. "Don't tell the cops about that," he said, trying to joke about it.

He died the next day.

Even more than I used to, I intrude into people's lives. I say, "You have seat belts or harnesses. Use them." John had harnesses in his pickup, but he never used them. He might still be ranching if he had. He was seventy-four. He had lived a good life. He told me he had. He told me, "I'm living on bonus time. Three score and ten is what we're given, the way the Bible says. I've already got a four year bonus."

So who knows what's up? John's gone, so who's making the decisions? Wayne says take some time off. Go to the funeral. But I don't go to the funeral. I didn't go to Mike's

either, three years before. Laura and Juniper and Amanda go to John's funeral, but I cut hay all day.

The summer Jim and I cut hay, John came up and drove swather part of the time so we could sharpen sickles bars, eat lunch, whatever we had to do. He was a good man to work for or to work with. I saw John headed around the willows toward me in the swather he was running. I jumped down from my swather, ran over, and waved him down. "The river washed through here. There's junk down in that tall grass."

"Well, I would have got down and looked."

"I'll walk it and show you what to go around." I walked ahead of his machine and directed him around trash down in dense, tall grass. He might think I'm being overly solicitous. He might think I think he's too old a codger to be climbing up and down. Actually, I don't want him to pick up any posts or limbs, because he isn't too old to climb up and down, but he is too old to fight a post if his machine picks one up and bites it tight, and I'll wind up fighting the post in the heat of the day.

I think that, but I don't attempt to explain it to him. He's sharp. He'll probably figure that out about the time I leave him with a cut around the junky area, walk back over, climb up into the swather I'm operating, and start back to cutting hay.

Jim said a horse he was riding reached out and bit a calf on the butt, something a good cow horse isn't supposed to do. John saw it happen and got angry at Jim about it. Next day, same horse. Same thing happened. Horse bit a calf despite Jim pulling on the reins trying to keep him from it. Then the horse got ornery, fought the reins, got wild, and ran smack into the corral wall. Jim sawed reins, hauled head, everything humanly possible to pull the horse out of running smack into

the corral wall, but the horse did it anyway. John saw it happen. After everybody got untangled from everything, John said, “That’s what happened yesterday, wasn’t it?”

“Yup.”

“Sorry I spoke sharp yesterday. We’ll have to get rid of that horse.” John knew if Jim couldn’t stop him from biting calves and acting goofy, nobody could.

Jim said he took his bull whip to work, and John gave him some bad looks, but he was pretty busy trying to load bulls, and he didn’t get a chance to say anything. The bull at the head of the line wouldn’t step through the doorway into the truck, so ten bulls stood in line without moving. Jim flipped the whip over the line and pulled it up short so the tip popped above the lead bull’s head. The bull loaded right up. The other nine bulls followed him into the truck. John saw that happen, and he never did say anything against the whip.

I never heard John order anyone to do anything. He always asked, and he was generous with “please” and “thank you.” He didn’t pay anywhere near top of the scale for ranch workers, but most of his workers really liked working for him.

Everybody is at the funeral. I’m the only one out here. I cut the hay from a long piece of ground along the edge of the swamp. For the first time this year, I see two pairs of adult cranes. I thought we might have two pairs this year, but I wasn’t sure until now. I’m pleased about it. The more cranes the better. One pair flies up over the willows and up Hale Valley. The other pair walks along the creek and disappears into the willows. I don’t see any of them again that day.

We haven’t picked up any posts with the swathers this year. I cleaned everything off the meadow last fall and then cleared the meadow again after high water left what it left in

the spring. It's easier to cut hay now than when I first started, because every year when I irrigate and when I ride around the ranch drying off, I figure again how I'll cut the hay, and I move junk out of the way. I remember areas that are too full of junk or too rough or too wet to cut.

Some of the people I've talked with over the years commented about how John managed his ranches. Doesn't he ever turn the ground? He should work it once in a while. Doesn't he ever put fertilizer on it? He should put fertilizer on it once in a while.

John's policy of doing the least possible is a wise policy. For fifty years, he took a good crop of wild meadow hay from this ranch. If he had a really good irrigator, he took a really good crop. He didn't deplete the soil. When I put water onto areas that hadn't been irrigated for years, the first year, they greened up. The second year, the hay grew more densely, and the third year, they bore a really good crop of hay. Because they never turned the soil, the Rouse brothers didn't lose much soil to erosion. Because they never added anything to the soil, they didn't disturb the organisms in the soil, and the organisms kept the soil loose and productive.

In the spring, many cubic yards of earthworm castings, with millions of tiny worms, lie in the ditches and out on open ground. Worms farm this ranch, build the soil, and produce good hay and grass to graze. Water flows down the ditches and spreads the new worms in the piles of castings across the ground. The new worms burrow into the ground and join their relatives already there. They grow, ingest dirt and organic material, and cast high-quality soil, loose, aerated, and much higher in nutrients than pre-worm soil.

Around most of the swamps, minimal digging in nearly-inundated dirt turns up hundreds of earthworms. For a few

weeks our first year here, I sold twenty to sixty dozen worms a week to the store in Sumpter, for resale to touring fisherpeople. I harvested twenty dozen from the garden as I turned the soil, getting ready to plant.

Sometimes I felt uneasy about selling worms. I told myself, “Jon, you live in a world where people kill each other for twenty dollars, for a difference in ideas, for a vote, for a whim, where thousands, maybe millions of people are starved, tortured, and killed because they’re in the way or they’re standing wrong, and you’re worried about is it moral to harvest conservatively from the abundance here so you can have some gas money, some change to feed the laundromat, some groceries. You must need to busy up your head with irrelevancies. Why not just give up and get a color television and meld into what everyone else sees?”

Demand for worms rose faster than I was prepared to go. Ranch work kept me busier and busier. I got the first check for ranch work and then the second, and I left the worms alone.

Hour after hour, I drive into dense, standing grass and leave windrowed hay behind me. Hour after hour, I remember. I’m holding a private ceremony. I wouldn’t have been able to blend it into John’s public funeral. It’s all right. Enough people attend John’s funeral. Enough people work on the meadow of Whitney Valley.

I developed this joke, a while ago. I told it to Jim.

We didn’t keep enough of the big bales of hay at Whitney. It snowed, and we fed cattle and used up the big bales. We still had cattle in Whitney Valley, so Nancy brought small bales up every day on a truck she backed to a stack of bales to pick up a load. Two bars at the front, with three sharp steel spikes each, each spike about three feet long, secured the

load. To unbind the load so we could cut the twine and sheaf off the hay, Nancy hit a switch in the cab, and hydraulic pistons extracted the spikes from the hay. While we sheafed off the first row of bales on the load, those sharp spikes reflected sunshine directly behind us. We rode the top of the load, where every motion of the truck at ground level magnified through the height of the load. We pitched and jarred as the truck lurched and yawed over bumpy ground.

I stayed very conscious of those potentially deadly spikes behind me, and the joke was this: If I slipped and impaled myself on the spikes and died, John would come to the door and knock, and when Laura opened the door, he would say, “Laura, I hate to have to tell you this, but Jon got those spikes right through him, and he’s dead.”

After a pause for the news to sink in, he’d say, “Uh, that leaves us a hand short. Could you help us finish feeding the cattle?”

Jim hesitated. I could see it going through his mind. Was I making fun of John and claiming he was an insensitive man? He knew I really liked John. When he settled the question of respect for John, he laughed. Then he said, “You know, the cattle would still have to be fed.”

I know. And the hay still has to be cut. The work has to go on. But I’m not out here because I’m devoted to the work but because it’s my way of laying John to rest, of settling his death in my mind. A funeral is not for the dead but for the living. My respect for John, my memories of him might not be of much importance to him, but they are to me. He was a good man, a man of good humor. He was a big man, but I don’t mean just physically big.

By late afternoon, I’ve cut a lot of hay, and I’ve completed my own service for John.

John Hayes takes over running the ranch and sends for his brother to help. John tells me to keep on working like I have been. He says they're going to keep me on.

I tell Laura, "I have a feeling in the marrow of my existence that we won't be here much longer."

In September, I draw my last check. It turns out the ranch doesn't have nearly as much cash as they thought it did. Most of the crew has to go.

I'm not interested in renting the small house Laura finds out about, in a close neighborhood in Baker. After eight and a half years of physical labor of many kinds on the ranch, and after eight and a half years of becoming stronger and stronger, I might be able to work a full time job, but I'm not interested in the full time job in a wood products factory in Baker.

I'm not ready to give up the fruits of the way we live. I'm not ready to step deeply into the mainstream of the culture. I wait. I wait without anxiety. I don't believe chance evolution brought about the complex interactions that make up nature in balance. I don't believe chance brought us to live eight and a half years in a place that has been so good for us.

The divinely intelligent force that brought us here and directed us into growth, that guided us into ever-developing sensitivity to and concern for wildlife, for harmonious balance in the world, is an eternal force. It has not ceased to exist in these few years. It has not abandoned us. There will be a way of existence that allows us to progress in ways that work for us.

That is the way it turns out. Late in October, we accept another caretaking job that provides us a very nice and, incidentally, very modern house, far enough away from town that we will still see wildlife, though not as much as at

Whitney. We sold or gave away or hauled to the dump everything we could get by without, and we left the ranch in Whitney Valley in October, four humans, one large, shaggy dog, one short-haired cat, and everything we owned in a pickup truck with sideboards and in a car.

Amanda and Juniper lived, grew and learned happily and with a great deal of freedom on the ranch in Whitney Valley for eight and a half years. They were ready for the next step in their adventure of living. They walked slowly around the part of the valley where we had lived. They said good bye to the barn, to ever-happy land, where the grass grew green and lush all summer, to the house, empty now of habitation but still full of memories, and to every other meaningful place.

We had time for thoughtful farewells. Laura and I also made the last rounds. The place with no electricity and no running water, only a hand-operated pitcher pump by the sink, had been good for all of us. We weren't in a rush to leave. Eventually, we gravitated to the vehicles, climbed in, and drove from the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon to Bend, in central Oregon, and from there thirteen miles to five thousand feet elevation on Tumalo Mountain, where we would take care of the water inlets for the city of Bend.

Our new job gives me time to write and time to help with Juniper's and Amanda's education. The job allows us time to keep our family strongly together. I think a lot about Whitney. At first, I worry, will the irrigation be kept up, so all the wildlife on the meadows has the right conditions to live and to carry on their species?

I can't do anything about the irrigation from where I am. I have to let go of worry. The forces that have provided for wildlife there for decades, for centuries, for millennia continue to provide.

As I have done many times, when I look at my daughters and at the birds all around us, I remind myself the birds and my daughters invest the full force of their existence in life.

I see them as good examples to follow. “Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them...” The life force, God, Good, takes care of the fowls of the air. Eternal forces of good, of love and intelligence take care of our daughters, take care of Laura, take care of me.

Choosing deeper meaning than concern merely for material fulfillment has worked very well for us. Education for our daughters, worked out by the four of us and gradually expanding into the world around us, has worked out very well. Juniper and Amanda continue building a broad, deep, effective education on the foundation we started within the family. As time passes, we see more and more good results from our approach to education and our approach to existence, within our family, and against the backdrop the world and the culture we live in provides us.

Weeks, months, and years pass. We continue to be pleased with the way our existence fits together, with the opportunities our time in Whitney Valley gave us to grow, to observe life around us, and to grow into more appreciation of and participation with life.
