

Bringing Drinking Water Home

A red pitcher pump beside the kitchen sink was the only plumbing in our house in Whitney Valley, in Northeastern Oregon. Laura and I and our daughters, Juniper and Amanda, for eight and a half years, hand pumped water from the shallow well under the house for our baths, for washing dishes, and all other needs except drinking. The iron algae and the strong taste of sulphur in the water encouraged us to find good drinking water elsewhere.

When we filled our drinking water jugs in the small town of Sumpter, thirteen miles over Huckleberry Pass from our home, we also visited friends and family, stopped for the mail, and used the laundromat to catch up on our laundry. Sumpter was our usual source for water through winter because it was easiest to get to and allowed us to break from winter isolation and catch up on seeing people.

Once snow melted from the land, our destinations spread out. Antler Guard Station, down North Fork Road two miles from us, had a small cabin, no longer used but kept in good shape by Forest Service workers. We filled our drinking water jugs from a deep-well, hand-operated pump in the front yard. Cold water that missed flowing into jugs liberally splashed laughing pumpers in hot summer sunshine.

Getting water was never a time just to fill jugs and go. We looked into the cabin through the windows again, even though the inside didn't change from one water-getting trip to another. New flowers blossomed in grasses heading up for seed. Juniper and Amanda climbed the split rail fence and talked about the adventures in T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* or whatever book they were involved with at that moment. Anyplace was a good place to act out adventures from books or from their imaginations.

The river ran close to Antler Guard Station. Though it was generous to call it a river in the low water time of summer, it was a place to explore, to invent adventures, and to imagine. Steep bluffs rose across the river from the guard station. I wasn't there the day Jim went along and showed the rest of my family how to climb several hundred feet up to the cave in the bluff and how to run, almost safely, back down the very steep ridge, but I enjoyed the excited recounting of the experience afterward.

Sometimes, we got our drinking water from Logging Camp Spring, two miles up the ridge from Antler Guard Station on a road closed by snow in winter. We rarely saw anyone else up the steep gravel road, except deer, elk, marmots, ground squirrels, and many different birds. A stout split-rail fence enclosed the spring. Water flowed from the spring through a pipe into a large trough outside the fence. We filled water bottles with the clean water running from the pipe, and animals could drink from the trough.

We talked together about the elk who lived in the Blue Mountains and drank from this trough, about cabbages and kings, about green moss growing in three feet of water in a green metal trough. I said, "Rick and Gwen and Angie and Ginnie bring their watermelons up here and leave them to float in the trough all day. This water is cold enough for a cold melon." The smell of cool air moving across cold water lingered around us in shade beside the road.

Across the road from the spring, where, a century ago, loggers camped, so many nails had been driven into trees to tie clotheslines to, to hang pots and pans, to hang tools from, that loggers after that wouldn't cut into the trees for fear of hitting nails with their saws and ruining expensive cutting chains. Old-growth fir, western larch, and ponderosa pine still grew at Logging Camp Spring and gave us a glimpse of what this country looked like before loggers worked on it.

The four of us walked between tall trees, out onto the top of the bluff, and looked at Whitney Valley spread green far below our feet, with our house way down there and seeming tiny from way up where we stood, two miles away. Close around our feet, chunks of petrified wood, once buried, eroded from the soil. Living trees, currant bushes, rabbit brush, with yellow flowers, bunch grass, wild flowers close against the ground grew around us as we stood on the bluff and looked at the valley below us.

Two miles down the river from Antler Guard Station, a small spring emerges from the stone ridge rising above the road. It was harder to fill the water jugs there, because there was no pipe carrying water away from the rock, and we had to catch water into the jugs where it fell in small streams over projecting rock.

Water cress grew profusely where the water flowed in the borrow pit above the road. Peppery green leaves added interest to our diet. We ate some of the spicy plant in the cool beside the road while we looked down on old-growth western larch and willow bush along the river and felt grateful that loggers through the years had left the timber along this part of the river alone so we could see it in its magnificent maturity. We took

water cress home with us and mixed it into a salad of greens harvested from our garden.

Did we need animal crackers? Off toward Austin Junction, the opposite way on highway 6 from Sumpter. We filled our jugs from a very cold, clean spring that delivered water down a plastic pipe to the shoulder of the highway. We drove a mile beyond the spring to a country store at Austin Junction. Juniper and Amanda bought a small box of animal crackers each, enough to last them a week or more.

Every time our supply of drinking water ran low, we held a conference, and the four of us decided, "Which of our sources for water do we visit today?"

What rules our exploration today, the need for human companionship? We visit family and friends, eat lunch at One-Eyed Charlie's, a restaurant in Sumpter while our laundry washes, or will our desire for water cress decide where we will get our water, or perhaps our desire to see Logging Camp Spring and to see our valley from the ridge again will decide? Or will we play and explore along the river by Antler Guard Station after pumping our jugs full? How long since anyone had animal crackers? We loaded the jugs and four humans, sometimes one dog, into the pickup and drove away for the adventure of the day and for clear, clean water to drink.