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The Coldest Place in Oregon
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We lived in Whitney Valley, in the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon, often the coldest place in Oregon and sometimes the coldest place in the nation. Our first winter there, the low temperatures excited me. I checked the thermometer hanging on the front porch hourly and announced temperatures to my wife and daughters, "18 below zero."

"26 below."

"30 below."

"32 below."

When I heard people speak of temperatures, I bottomed every claim. Someone said, "It was 18 below zero at our place last night."

"We had 35 below last night. Two nights before that, we had 42 below." I was as proud of the cold as if I'd created it myself.

We had no electricity, no phone, no plumbing beyond a pitcher pump at the kitchen sink, and we lived more than a half-mile from our nearest neighbors.

The wind blew through the old house. We sealed it with newspaper, cardboard, paneling, clear plastic over the windows, so the wind had to detour, but it still wasn't very effective at keeping out the cold.

Very cold nights, I kept the heater in the back room, the heater in the living room, and the cookstove all burning. So that dealing with the cold didn't usurp all other activities, I wrote and read and played my guitar and sang all night.

I trusted the systems I built to take the smoke from the wood burning in our stoves outside, and I knew the sheet metal reflectors I put between the stoves and the nearest flammable parts of the house protected us well from fire. I still checked the stoves and flues frequently. Plastic sacks we left in the pickup contained sleeping bags, blankets, clothing, and food. If a fire did start, we wouldn't be left with only our pajamas in deadly cold.

We read of a school teacher sitting close to the stove in the hotel when it was 55 below zero in Whitney, in the 1920s. Our house was better sealed than the long gone hotel was. Still, at 56 below zero, we used every blanket we had in the house. We wore long underwear, socks, and hats, and then we didn't move enough to have to heat up a new area in the bed.

I prowled the house. I fed firewood to our stoves and checked our

daughters. If they drew up into tight balls, I added more blankets.

When we first moved to Whitney Valley, Juniper was four. That first winter, I woke from a deep sleep, one very cold night, when I heard Juniper's determined voice filling the house, "Head is cold. Bring hat." We were sure she would communicate if she was cold, but Amanda often slept cold and said nothing, so I watched her closely on the coldest nights.

Just before Christmas, 45 below zero, cold snow on the ground beneath a cold moon in the clear sky, nearing midnight, we had company. A family of four drove from western Oregon, where the temperatures are much milder, in a new diesel pickup. Halfway between Prairie City and Whitney Valley, the truck started running rough. The fuel started to gel in the cold. Burt, the father of the family drove the pickup along the winding mountain highway and hoped. The engine quit completely, and the truck coasted to a stop right at the Whitney intersection, a hundred and fifty yards from our house. He saw the smoke from our chimneys and walked down and knocked on our front door.

He stood over the stove. He was dressed in cowboy boots, jeans, light shirt, light jacket, and he wore no hat. He had just achieved a deeper understanding of cold. I said, "Go get your family."

"I'm going. I'm going."

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 fast waiting for him, so I got between him and the stove, pushed him and said again, "Go get your family."

He walked back to his truck and got his wife and two children. They walked down the gravel road that had been plowed almost clear of snow, deadly cold in the moonlight. They came in and bunched up around the stove.

We found every rug, rag, towel and blanket we had and helped them bed down around the living room heater. I stepped over them to feed the heater wood the rest of the night.

In the morning, I loaned Burt warm clothing, and we walked down the road to the ranch owner's hunting cabin, where there was a phone, in bright sunshine. It was still 40 below zero. Burt called and arranged for help, and we walked back to our house.

Laura fixed breakfast for everyone.

About 11, Burt's brother showed up and he and Burt added winterized fuel to the pickup's tanks. Burt extended a twenty dollar bill toward me.

"Thanks, but I don't want it. I like to think people help each other out all they can. If you feel like you owe, help somebody who needs help. Keep passing it on."

He said, "I would have happily paid many times that for a motel room for the night."

"I know, but I still don't want it."

He said, "I guess I'll have to be satisfied with just saying thank you."

"That's sufficient."

He reached, and we shook hands. "Take care."

"You too. Be careful."

They drove on toward Baker City in brilliant northeastern Oregon sunshine. I looked at the thermometer, hanging on the front porch out of the sunshine. It said 35 degrees below zero.