

How Time Flies When I'm Having Fun

That was the last time I wore a wrist watch. Maybe I would have started using pocket watches anyway. Wearing a chronometer on my wrist made me too conscious of time. Every time I turned my wrist toward the sun, man's busy concept of time as hurrying hours, minutes, and seconds appeared. Its face stared into my face.

I tried to become less ruled by time. I left my alarm clock in the valley when I drove up the mountain, and I lived well without it. I woke easily a while before daylight with nothing to call me but the eastern sky showing lighter grey against the dark night as the earth slowly turned my camp toward the sun.

Hunger decided when I would eat more than the hour of the day did. I quit work when I thought I had done enough for the day, and I went to bed after dark, when I felt sleepy and when I had watched and listened to as much of the night on the quiet mountain as I needed to. I still referred to the hours of the day, as shown by my wrist watch, but I referred less as spring progressed into summer and summer toward fall.

Most of that summer, I worked alone. I contracted blister-rust control work for the Forest Service. I hiked through the forest, hooked a rabbit-eared pick under the crowns of ribes bushes, gooseberries and currants, and levered them out of the ground to slow the spread of blister rust, that depended on the bushes for part of its life cycle and then fatally infected pine trees. Sometimes I had to work hard to stay on the mountain alone, to be content with my own company and my own thoughts, with the quiet work I did through days of sunshine, to be content with the shelter I took during mountain storms of spring and summer, to be content with my nights alone in the mountain forest.

But I never lost my awe at the beauty of the mountains where I worked. I added daily to the list of wildlife I saw, deer, eagles, hawks, thirty varieties of smaller birds, weasels, a badger, near-sighted and pretending to be very bad-tempered so other creatures who shared its habitat, including me, wouldn't bother it, flowers in endless variety coloring the mountain and releasing soft, pleasant odors into mountain breezes.

I worked both sides of a steeply-sloped canyon. Muggins Creek ran clear and cold down the bottom of the canyon.

Granite bluffs rose abruptly from deeply soiled slope where pine trees, fir trees, and brush grew, from steeply-sloped meadows where pine duff and leaves decomposed to soil in sunshine, rain, and snow.

Large parts of the canyon's steep sides were clear of gooseberry and currant bushes, so I only had to travel through, checking to be sure I didn't miss a rare bush here or there. I ran across the slope and tried to maintain my elevation. The canyon sloped so steeply, I started to angle downslope. I spotted a tree ahead of me that held a limb down the slope, within my reach. Still in a full-speed run, I grabbed the limb and held on as it arced me uphill by holding me to its length from the tree. I let go when I headed a little uphill and galloped across the slope, spotted another tree, and did the same thing again, so my progress was an exhilarating race across slope, starting to head down, arcing part of a ring around a pine tree, catapulted slightly up slope, straight across, starting to lose altitude, and the whole thing over again. I had so much fun, time absolutely flew.

When I grabbed one low-hanging limb, a branch drove under my watch band and held it. When I rocketed on across the slope, my watch didn't. The limb jerked my arm back toward the tree. My watch band broke, and the branch sprang back and threw my watch toward the clear blue mountain sky.

I walked through that area several times in the next few days as I scrambled down to Muggins Creek for a cold drink of water, but I never saw band, case, nor face of that watch again. I was glad the band was not stronger.

I lived without reference to the marking of hours. The sun, the moon, the amount of work I had done, the motion of stars, hunger and tiredness measured time for me, and that was sufficient.

When I did buy a new watch, it was the kind I carried in my pocket. Sometimes I did need to know hours and minutes, and I dug into my pocket for my watch. Not having a timepiece quite so available left me a little freer from constant reference to hours and minutes, a little more tuned to the cycle of the sun and the moon, the turning of the earth, the cycles of nature. I'm pleased with that.