

Oregonauthor.com

Jon Remmerde

Published in *The Christian Science Monitor*.

1,006 words

### Irrigating with Guidance from Water

When I heard about the job, I was sure I could do anything that needed doing to take care of the 1200 acre ranch in northeastern Oregon's Blue Mountains. Then I looked the ranch over and wondered if I could irrigate it and keep fences repaired. I didn't even know where some of the boundaries were. I didn't know much about irrigation. I didn't know much about repairing or building fence.

I had faith in the simple obviousness of the work and in my ability to figure out what I needed to know to do the work well.

I drove out to the small, mountain valley in warm spring sunshine and talked to Tex, the previous caretaker, as he bolted a new axle under his trailer, so he could hook the trailer behind his pickup and roll on to his next job, in Prairie City. From under his trailer, he said, "Don't stand in my light. I got to get this nut on, and I can't see up here if you throw a shadow on my work."

When he got everything tight, he crawled from under and drew me a map in dirt, "...over there west, where the timber turns and runs west along the meadow. Next fence up is the west boundary. Map in the dirt ain't the same as bein' there, but I'll tell you what I know."

When they hired me, I told John and Mike all I knew was a map in the dirt and vague ideas where Tex pointed and described. Most of the ranch, Tex and I couldn't see from where we were, and Tex had to get on down the road, made late by a bent axle.

John said, "We'll come up and show you around when you get settled and get the water started." But they stayed busy running their home ranch with a small crew, and they didn't get up to Whitney Valley until mid-June, when I'd already flooded most of the meadow, repaired some of the fence, worked out how to do the work by doing it, and tried to make best use of summer's rapidly-diminishing water.

Sometimes, I wasn't sure where the ranch boundaries were. Sometimes I wondered if I fixed the right fences and irrigated the right ground. Sometimes I felt like a stranger in a strange land. I kept working.

Occasionally, I felt almost overcome by uncertainty.

I started out repairing fences I was sure were mine to fix. I drew maps and then got more definition of boundaries of the ranch from John and Mike each time I drove down for gasoline and my monthly pay check.

I found places to take water from the river or from streams or springs. I followed the water as it flowed and directed it where I wanted it to go with dirt and with portable plastic curtain dams.

At first, I would have hurried the water, in the interest of getting the job done quickly.

When I started, water ran high in the river from spring snow melt. Some ditches ran full from overflow. I divided water flowing down big ditches and started it into smaller ditches that spilled water out through meadow grasses. Grass that hadn't been cleared for years choked many small ditches. I sharpened my shovel and cleared ditches.

I didn't realize yet that I needed to slow down to do the job well. Some ditches, water spilled out because growing grass choked the ditch. Spilled water spread across the meadow, soaked ground, and continued spreading. Two days, or four days, or a week later, water flowed back into the ditch a hundred yards farther down, below the choked up part of the ditch. In that ditch, cutting grass and roots and dirt clear hadn't been necessary.

I repaired fences, which took me away from irrigation while water flowed, soaked into wild grass roots and wild flower roots, spread out across the meadow, filled low spots, surrounded high spots, and ran into the slough that took runoff back to the river. While I did things other than irrigation, water went on working, slowly and without doubt, with no sense of urgency.

When they did get up to Whitney, John asked me, "Did you get the irrigation figured out?"

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

John and Mike laughed. John said, "It sure does."

"Once I was sure of that. I was all right."

Canada geese nest in Whitney Valley. Snow geese fly into Whitney Valley for a late-night sleepover and into the tall blue sky above ridges growing conifers on their way somewhere else before sunrise. Ducks, cranes, herons, swans, rails, and many species of secretive small birds live in thick, tall-growing meadow and swamp grasses. Hawks, ravens, eagles,

owls fly high above the meadows.

When I got back to the meadow, I saw that I'd save myself a lot of work if I gave the water time to show me where I did and didn't need to clear ditches.

The job shifted from almost impossible to quite manageable when I understood the water would outline my work for me and do much of the work if I gave it time. There was still more work than one man could do, but I knew John and Mike didn't expect superhuman achievements from me.

Part of my work became remembering where the water ran, so in late summer and fall, after we harvested hay, I could continue improving ditches and build small dikes of dirt to get water across low ground and onto higher ground that had not been irrigated for years.

Six years of steady improvement got water just about every place it would go on the ranch, for a good crop of hay, for abundant wildlife. I worked as slowly as water soaks the growing meadow, patient as a hawk, gliding on summer air in the mountain blue sky above the meadow, waiting to see what passing time and running water would unfold as wild plants grew toward the sun.