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Mail at "Whitney 3"

When I transferred my published essays from their disorderly, "thrown in as received" cardboard box to an alphabetized file, I was doubly rewarded. Not only do I have a tidy collection of published essays and easy access to whatever one I want to find, but at the bottom of the box of essays, I also found several letters addressed "To Daddy; Our House; Whitney 3."

Whitney 3 was actually our phone number when we took care of a cattle and hay ranch in northeastern Oregon's Blue Mountains. It was the number of the phone in the mostly unused house down the road about a hundred yards from our house. We had a key to that house, and we walked down and made phone calls when we needed to.

Our mail came to a post-office box thirteen miles over a mountain pass in Sumpter. But "Our House; Whitney 3" was a sufficient address for the letters, since they came to me through in-house mail, delivered to a Kleenex box thumbtacked to the wall near the doorway from the kitchen and living room into Amanda's and Juniper's bedroom.

We are mail-oriented people. Part of our earnings, checks from publications, comes in the mail. We write many letters and receive quite a few. When Juniper and Amanda were about six and four, they learned to read and write, and they began to be disappointed that they rarely got mail. We tacked up our own mailbox, and we started writing each other letters.

We were always delighted to get letters. It was best of all if the recipient went to the box without being told there was mail, but if necessary, someone would say, "Have you checked the mail lately?"

Juniper started writing letters first, because she learned to write first, but Amanda had little patience with being left behind, and she learned posthaste.

We told each other what we'd been doing, what we were thinking about, what we'd been dreaming about.

One of Juniper's letters, which I found under all the essays, says she bought some gingersnap animals the day before. She said she didn't think she would reach up very far on that Smokey Bear statue outside the restaurant.

That day, Laura and Amanda and Juniper had gone to Austin Junction, thirteen miles in the opposite direction from Sumpter. We sometimes got our drinking water from a spring near there and then drove another mile to the store and restaurant. That store was our best source for small boxes of animal cookies. Amanda and Juniper usually made the box of animal cookies last several days.

One of Juniper's letters says, "I think you're a good author. I would publish your books if I were a publisher." Having my own in-house support group gave me more rewards, in some ways, than getting my books published; it quickly pulled me up out of frustration to recognize my many blessings.

In that letter, Juniper told me, with justifiable pride, that she and Amanda saved a handsome gray fledgling from our dog, Thorn, and she asked, "When can we go pick huckleberries?"

Juniper's and Amanda's letters were always illustrated with color pictures, some realistic, and some whimsical. Amanda invented fuzzy little creatures called ground harts, and they graced many of her communications.

In my letters to our daughters, I often told about wild animals I had seen during my peregrinations about the ranch: hawks, eagles, sandhill cranes, deer, elk, coyotes, and a dozen other species. What I wrote about what I saw on the ranch increased their desire to go with me when I worked so they could see more wild animals. I drew simple, unpracticed depictions of flowers to illustrate my letters. My daughters didn't mind that my drawings didn't show a lot of skill.

Sometimes, especially in winter, the four of us spent almost all our time together, and we got out of the habit of writing each other letters.

But soon, a day came when someone asked, "What happened to the mailbox? What happened to writing letters to each other?" and someone tacked a mailbox to the wall, again. The container didn't matter, a paper sack, a used manila envelope, a small box. What mattered was what came in the mail. All the letters were always a pleasure to receive.

We haven't had an in-house mailbox for a few years. Sometimes members of this family remember traditions that

seem to be part of the past and renew them. Lately, we've sometimes been disappointed that we don't receive more mail in the mailbox up by the highway. Some friends are faithful correspondents. Many aren't.

Modern existence trims the ranks of serious letter-writers. Those of us who preserve that art form must support each other's efforts. There is a concentration of four of us here who value communication through letters, but we are seldom far enough from each other to write letters back and forth, so we might need to renew the in-house letters.

The situation calls for a conference. If the tradition of in-house communication by letters does not lend itself to renewal, remembering it together in detail will be a rewarding experience for all of us.