

Big Country

I lived in Texas for two years in the Navy in the early 70's and I remember one morning driving to the Vought aircraft factory and hearing a Dallas radio jockey exclaim "Hey Texas! Have you ever seen such a big, beautiful place in the entire world?" Now I had driven across Texas two or three times on my trips back to the Northwest so I was mystified as to what he was referring to. Being from Wallowa County I had some different thoughts about what was big and beautiful. I will grant the guy that there is a lot of flat featureless acreage in Texas, but otherwise, not so much beauty. This memory puts me in a mind to remember some trips into the awe inspiring Imnaha and Snake River canyons.

My first trip at about age 6 was with Bob and Wanda Soreweide who rented the Locke farm north of ours on Prairie Creek. The children and our sleeping bags rode in the back of their old green REO grain truck on the washboard gravel road to Indian Crossings and camped for a week in mid-summer. Bob and Wanda were true outdoors people (and horse trainers) and they taught us about fishing (still Salmon spawning at the Blue Hole), picking Huckleberries, and finding Morel mushrooms. I thought I was transported to Shangri-La with those towering canyon walls above us and the River before us, and not another camper present (no Forest Service facilities either). However, as most of us know the Imnaha is an impressive but gentle canyon compared to the raw Hells Canyon.

I had been to Hat Point a couple of times but my first trip to the bottom was in Ted Grote's Bell helicopter to fight a small fire as a summer employee of the Joseph Ranger Station in 1965 (Gib Hansen was fire boss). Ted was always a little overweight and I wondered about his heart as we took off from Memaloose Springs landing strip. Ted dumped us off at the bottom and we proceeded to put out the fire. During a break Dave Parks who was along decided to scramble up the nearby rim rocks. After a bit we heard a shriek from Dave and looked up to see him heft a huge rock over his head and smash something. Climbing up he had put his hand up over the rock above him and grabbed ahold of something long, soft, and squishy, a large rattler sunning itself. Dave had a massive amount of adrenalin in his system. Later Ted came down with his chopper to pick us up in the hot summer canyon. I remember Ted maneuvering back and forth down in the canyon trying to find a cold air pocket to give us some extra lift to get out of the canyon. It took a long time to get up to the top and as the minutes ticked off I kept looking at that paunch on Ted. However, Ted lived a very long, productive life.

My second trip into Hells Canyon was the next summer in 1966, again on a small fire in the canyon bottom below Hat Point. I was stationed at Lick Creek so I drove the old

Hockett family WWII jeep (no cab) out to Memaloose Springs to wait for Ted in his helicopter. Ted showed up with a new fellow and the two of us and our backpacks with gear were lifted down to the river bottom. We spent a day putting out the fire and the next morning packed up for the long hike up out of the canyon, no chopper lift this time. At this place there is a 5,000 foot elevation difference from the river up to the canyon rim and there was no trail; we were just going to hike straight up the canyon face. The back packs (a U-shaped piece of plywood with canvas stretched across it) were about 60 Lbs. with all the firefighting tools. After about an hour the other fellow (who I realized was out of shape) kept lagging behind. We talked and I went on ahead and after about 2-1/2 hours topped out and walked to the Jeep and took a nap. The other fellow (exhausted) topped out about 40 minutes later and we started our drive to Joseph. This was Friday of Chief Joseph Days and just after the Fred Bird place Doc Nelson pulled us over for not having a tail light. Doc was very friendly and we had a good conversation about Hells Canyon (we were both members of the Hells Canyon Preservation Council, trying to stop new dams on the Snake). Doc gave us the warning ticket with a big smile and thanked us for putting out the fire.

The last time I was in Hells Canyon was in the spring of 2018 on a trip to Dug Bar. Dug Bar was a significant name to me as a teen working in the hay fields south of the Blue Barn (not so blue then) and watching Doug Tippett roaring up the gravel road in his truck with horse in the early morning, headed out to their Dug Bar Ranch. Doug would honk and wave each time he drove up the road. In 2018 my wife Wendy and I (city girl from the Bay Area) rented a 4-wheel drive pickup from Main Street Motors and headed to the Bar for the first time. The drive on the one lane dirt road from the Imnaha Bridge to Dug Bar is one of the most spectacular drives in North America. There are expansive vistas that are equal to those of the Grand Canyon. You feel a different person the first time you experience this drive. In the spring everything is a dramatic verdant green in the canyons and it is unworldly to your eye if you are used to the brown of late summer. The mind opens up and one experiences the immensity of the earth.

We proceeded slowly over deep rutted roads (not yet graded by the County; there had been serious rain storms that spring) down to the old Tippett Ranch house and Dug Bar. We read about the Chinese Miners who were massacred, and the signs about the Nez Perce fleeing across the Snake, and then had our picnic lunch. After soaking up the isolated ambience of a place few have visited, we started back up the cliff hanging road. After just getting to the top of the canyon who did we meet? A brand new maroon colored Toyota Avalon sedan with a mother from Japan and a daughter who was a student at Portland State University. As our cars faced each other on the one lane road I got out and walked up to talk to them (the daughter spoke English). Speaking through their car window they wanted to know how much further it was to Halfway. I took a

long moment to compose my answer and tell them they took the wrong turn at The Bridge. To tamp down their rising anxiety I offered to turn their car around for them, no small feat with the bumper hanging over a shear drop off. Now turned around we promised to follow them closely until they got back to the bridge where they decided to head to Joseph for the night, it being about 3:00 pm. A very memorable trip for us and the visitors from Japan. In case you don't know it you can record this road trip in Google Earth maps and play it back with 3d video as if you are flying over the road at low altitude with the canyon towering over you. Not as thrilling as actually driving the road, but still scenic, and much safer and cheaper. Texans could definitely gain some perspective by visiting Wallowa County.

Roger Hockett grew up in Wallowa County and is retired in Newcastle, Wa. He is a veteran and spent a life designing, crafting, and manufacturing furniture.