

## Our Brief Existence

As a young boy riding old Diamond near Downey Lake on The Divide I would sometimes daydream about a Nez Perce party coming over the ridge top, bareback on their multi-spotted horses and their feathered hunting gear. A thrilling mental image for a young adventurer. My family “owned” that area of The Divide but of course the Nez Perce would have laughed at that, telling me, man can not own the land, the land is unto itself. Before the mounted Nez Perce there may have been ancient humans on foot who camped near the lake where abundant game have gathered for eons in early spring. With the heat of climate change the snow fed basalt basin is now drying up in the summer and will only be a bird nesting habitat in the spring.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Downey Lake was homesteaded by a variety of pioneers including Charles Toney, Henry Scott, and Lola Walker Quinn... a veritable land rush. The early pioneers built a two-story house, a cellar, a well house, a large barn, and corrals. During cattle round-ups in the spring and summer we would sweep out the small weather-beaten house and put down our sleeping bags on the old iron bedstead springs. In the early morning, breakfast was cooked on the old wood stove while the horses were caught and readied for the day’s work. In the bedrooms upstairs, the walls were papered with yellowing newspapers or Sears and Roebuck Catalog pages from the 20’s and 30’s. By the fifties the homestead was in a state of collapse. It is all entirely gone now, vandalized and burned down by hunters and antique thieves.

In 1989 Jerry Gildemeister wrote a book called *Around the Cat’s Back* (wonderfully illustrated by Don Gray) which recounts the early life of Daisy and Caroline Wasson growing up on The Divide, 1885-1895. It is an informing glimpse into the daily lives of humans living on the same timeless landscape. The essence of the book is the elemental simplicity of living that gives forth happiness. The only technology they have is a treasured foot-pedaled sewing machine. All else is a manual world of sweaty effort, which is found to be sustaining and enjoyable. They were living near the edge where the biological and geologic world confront humans on Nature’s terms.

How did we get from Nez Perce hunting parties and 19<sup>th</sup> Century homesteads to satellite guided farming? Where do we go from here as a civilization given artificial intelligence is now a reality and climate change is upon us? Other than nostalgia, are there lessons to be learned from the past?

Younger people do not reflect on these questions; it is left to the older generation to consider the arc of life. However, the young might consider that everything in their lives

today will someday be mere memories and decaying, dusty remnants. We are much more transitory than the Greeks and Romans who built with marble that stands today after 2,400 years (a blink of the eye in geologic time). Our digital age is even more ephemeral than the old homesteads. There are people today trying to resurrect the recent past of analog artifacts like vinyl records and 35mm camera film which were popular only a few years ago. The pace of life keeps accelerating under the belief that “new” is better than “before”. This is a constant generational difference. In the fifties no one wanted the old black and brown cars from the forties; we wanted those beautiful, colorful Fords and Chevy’s with the bigger engines, plush interiors, and new gadgets.

But can the biology of the ancient human mind handle the speed and relentless complexity of change enveloping us in 2023? Often while working in the woodshop I tell myself to slow down, it doesn’t matter how fast the lamp I’m making gets done. Enjoy the stroke of the plane and scraper curling up the shavings; be in rhythm with your ancestral gene pool, especially with your favorite music drifting from the old speaker on the wall. All of us need a place of respite where the mind can relax into commonality with the natural world and be in the moment. Sit in the warm sun, feel the gentle breeze on our skin, see the fluttering of the bright green leaves on the tree, hear the song of the birds, and feel our muscles and mind relax. Or like my father, stand quietly in the pasture with his curious cattle gathered around and enjoy a cigarette. To each his own.

One wonders if many of the mass shootings and growing drug abuse are a symptom of this unsustainable pace of life in the midst of over population. For myself I find it mentally exhausting keeping up with changes to my own personal technology and I know young people in their thirties that are burnt out from the constant rush to raise children, work in the frenzied digital world, and attend repeated weekend social get-togethers with friends. Many of the newer residents in the County have fled this hyper life to live quietly among the Wallowa’s or they are descendant residents who are staying put to be at ease with their world.

Going forward it is important that the County’s residents consider carefully efforts to grow and develop that might lead to more people, more complexity, and a faster pace of life. It is probably more sustaining to focus on the quality of life, rather than how much more “stuff” one can rapidly acquire. Regardless of the human choices made, I am comforted by the knowledge that The Divide will remain basically the same as it has been for thousands of years.

I am grateful to Tracey Madsen, Deputy Clerk, for archive work she provided on the deeds to the property.

Revision R2

*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.*