

Tragedy Averted

In my youth there were many tragedies that occurred in Wallowa County, somewhat surprising for an isolated, sparsely populated, rural area. I knew many of the affected adults through my parents or was in school with their children. I will never forget the day in second grade at Joseph Elementary (now the Forest Service office) when the principle came into our room with a sad, grave face and removed the little girl sitting a few desks away. Her father had just been killed in a logging accident. Nor the time in 8th grade when playing basketball at Lostine we were informed that the step mother of a teammate had been killed on the way to the game in an auto accident. Myself I have had several close calls like the time in the Forest Service I nearly severed my leg's main artery on upper Big Sheep with a chain saw while cutting slash in front of Mac Isley's Cat. The saw cut through the thick leather chaps and Levis pant leg leaving a 6 inch long slightly bleeding scratch. Or that foggy early morning take-off at NAS Miramar in an F-4 when we experienced a fire warning light at rotation, aborted, the tail hook sheared off on the arresting cable, and we ran off the end of the runway at 120 mph with a full load of fuel. As fate would have it, it rained hard the night before and the ground was very soft; the F-4 plowed down to a slow stop, up to it's belly in mud. One step off the wing to the ground while listening to the wail of the distant sirens approaching in the fog. And just along Tenderfoot Valley Road three families had experienced tragedies in the fifties and sixties.

However, there were also times when tragedy was averted and one of those occurrences has vividly stuck in my mind all these years.

In the 1950's on a Sunday in January my family had all gone skiing at the Eagle Cap Ski Club rope tow behind the West Moraine of Wallowa Lake, on Mt. Joseph. At the top of the steep slope (about 1/4 mile long) was a wood shack that housed an old auto engine and several large iron pulleys and gears where the rope went around and then back down the mountain. The rope entered the shack through a narrow gap in the boards of about 12 inches wide by 50" high. Down the slope 20 feet or so was a jerry-rigged webbing of trip-wires as a safety measures to activate the shut-off switch on the motor. I doubt if that crude safety technology would cut it in our litigious society of the 21st Century.

Mid-afternoon I was standing at the top of the slope about 50 feet from the shack. My older brother David was standing down the slope and near the front of the shack, both of us on our skis. Suddenly we both heard a shrieking scream coming from an approaching girl on the tow rope at about 50 feet from the mouth of the shack. The girl

was Sally Wilson, daughter of the District Attorney Keith Wilson; Sally was about 18 years old. She was using a U-shaped steel clamp device that had a rope on the end of it which is attached around your waist. You put the U-clamp over the tow rope and pull back, and the friction would grip the steel U-clamp to the rope, and you wouldn't have to grab the rope with your gloves (which was tiring by the end of the day). Tow ropes continuously wind and turn as they go up the mountain and through the gears. The rope on Sally's steel clamp had become entangled and wrapped around the tow rope and she was being pulled mercilessly toward the shack opening and grinding gears with no hope of untangling herself.

Normally you would reach out and grab the trip wires but as we watched her she was struggling in such a state of fear she did not reach out and trip the wires but passed through the first set towards the rumbling gears in the shack. David, seeing her pass through the first set of trip wires, made a couple of steps toward the shack and lunged as far as he could and with the end of his ski pole barely tripped the second set of backup wires at the entry hole to the shack ... the motor stopped. Silence on the slope.... except for the hysterical sobbing of Sally. Walter Klagas and Kirk Hayes pulled a toboggan up the slope (the tow was off), strapped Sally in it, and skied her down to be taken to the hospital. I can still see in my mind David leaping, the motor suddenly stopping, and hearing the brief silence. Tragedy averted by fate placing my brother at this place, at that critical moment, and giving him the unthinking instinct to quickly stretch as far as he could to trip the safety wire.

As you get on in years these near-tragedy events become clearer in your mind, and you think of them more often. You realize that pure chance has a lot to do with living to be an older person.

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