

"DRY LAND"

By Dan Duling

In this desert, I am surrounded by water. There is the wild water of the Juniper Flat aquifer buried deep below me, pulsing so faintly that even a water witch can be forgiven for not finding it the first time. There is the water that conceals itself in clouds above, streams of ice crystals drifting overhead oblivious to the thirst below, or boiling up in massive banks of cumulus and nimbus clinging to the horizon, the handmaidens of a curious and spiteful god that doles out life-giving moisture only when he/she damn well pleases.

And there are the three living streams that formed the boundaries of my world from age five to eighteen. Or rather two creeks (we called them "cricks" in the flat, largely unaccented rural-ese that was the mother tongue of Central Oregon) and one certifiable river, the Deschutes (Duh-SHOOTS).

The Deschutes was a good, strong and determined river, cutting its way northward through the heart of Central Oregon, twisting and winding through a series of canyons, given to heart-pounding rapids here and there, a falls or two just to keep things interesting, and several deep and seemingly calm stretches where the dark, cold waters could hide the rainbow trout, steelhead and an occasional spawning salmon on their journeys to and from the much larger Columbia River and perhaps, past dam locks, pollution spills and all other manner of obstacles, miraculously to the salt waters of the Pacific.

The waters of the Deschutes at one of its narrower spots played a part in the birth of what I would call my hometown -- even though it was a dozen miles from where I called home -- because folks who, for whatever reason, made it to the banks of the river at this particular point over a century ago, decided they wanted to get to the other side. The current, being too cold, swift and deep to swim, presented a challenge. A bridge that would eventually be built years later was far more than any of these earlier travelers had either the patience or the interest in trying to build. They were, after all, "travelers," on the move, going somewhere, which in this part of Central Oregon usually meant -- and still means -- "somewhere else."

But one enterprising homesteader had the idea for a ferry -- a raft attached to a cable, pulled from one side of the river to the other by the force of the current. This being the American west, it's safe to say the idea that one could charge whatever the traffic would allow for this service would make the effort worthwhile. It's an old principle: charge as much as you can get away with but not so much that you'll encourage competition or revolution. Howard Maupin and his son Perry started a ferry service that eventually gave the town of Maupin on the Deschutes its name. Howard Maupin's previous claim to fame was as the man who brought down Paulina, a renegade warrior who earned a reputation for preying not only on the new settlers but also stealing from his fellow tribesmen on the nearby Warm Springs Reservation. Depending on who you hear it from, Howard Maupin caught up with Paulina camped by a stream and opened fire. Paulina's bones were left to bleach in the sun and, true to Oregon's deeply-entrenched sense of paradox, there are now more places in this state named after Paulina than any other historical figure. I learned this -- indeed, *had* to learn this bit of local history in

fourth grade when Mrs. Paulson tried to make the history of the Old Oregon Country seem like something other than an abstract bunch of memorizable facts that would allow even the dimmest of her classes to skate by to fifth grade.

But getting back to the Deschutes, there was one stretch of that winding waterway that touched me on a personal level. This was a snaking section of it located about six miles south of Maupin. This stretch began at the mouth of Neenah Creek and ended at the mouth of Wapinitia Creek maybe three miles further downstream.

The two canyons cut out of the basalt by these two creeks can, in some places, take your breath away with their depth, their treachery to the unwary hiker or simply the beauty of their rimrocks, rockslides and natural vegetation made up mostly of cheat grass, sagebrush and junipers. And at one point a few miles upstream from their respective mouths on the Deschutes, these two canyons come perilously close to converging, separated by a lumbering line of hills that at first abruptly and then rather gently slope up from the plateau level that typifies the larger area known as Juniper Flat.

As a result, the geometric shape of the plateau created by these three surrounding canyons, the Deschutes, Neenah and Wapinitia, somewhat resembles a partially-inflated triangle of around 1,300 acres. And with its rimrock boundaries literally cutting it off from the rest of Juniper Flat, this plateau could easily inspire any number of utopian or dystopian fantasies: from an isolated, separatist Eden to an arid Alcatraz. Shortly after my parents purchased it in 1946, it became "Duling's Natural Pasture," and the cattle that periodically inhabited this plateau from which escape was highly unlikely would wear the family brand, the "Rocking NP."

Very near the center of the plateau stood the house, the barn and the various out buildings that are required for creating the illusion of habitation in the midst of, as I later liked to describe it, "acres and acres of nothing." For me, this natural wonder, this bastion of basalt surrounded by three moats that put any other castle to shame, was indeed an Alcatraz of alienation. But I'll save that for later. Because this story is about water. And water, as anyone who has even considered the prospect of dry-land farming will tell you, is not something to be taken lightly. Because without it, you are going straight to that part of the Scriptures that talks about "Dust to Dust." Dry-land farmers don't so much live in fear of that very real possibility as work out their personal spiritualities in expectation of it. Dust, indeed.

From the beginning, everybody knew the Natural Pasture wasn't a very promising candidate for irrigation. For one thing, even a non-geologist could look down at the trickles of water in the bottom of Neenah and Wapinitia Creek canyons and the more impressive blue snake of the Deschutes and get a pretty fair idea where the water table for this region was located. And it certainly wasn't just waiting to bubble up to the surface the first time you drove a shovel into the dirt. It was *way the hell down there*.

At first, water was pumped from Wapinitia Creek up over the rimrock to a holding tank in a three-story water tower next to the house. This imposing monolith with its square, white dome holding a huge wooden tank, was another one of those man-made creations that, on some fundamental level, makes so little sense, that it can take on, especially for an impressionable kid with an overactive imagination, all sorts of mythic and frightening connotations. "It's a tower, but how do you get in...how do you get OUT?...what if...what if..." And so on. At best, it was a monument to human industry that

you just know is going to prompt someone someday soon to pound his fist into his forehead and exclaim, "What the hell was I thinking?" The water tower was the place where, during the darkest days of my childhood, I imagined being sealed up once and for all, safe, secure, drowned and dead. To drown in a desert. Welcome to hell's version of heaven and the birth of adolescent paradox. But I digress.

During the 1950s, two wells were drilled near the house. The first, witched by a local water witch with a dousing rod, went down, down, down, 300...400...500 feet toward the rich wet vein we'd been assured was just waiting to be spiked and would soon be sending us transfusion after transfusion of life-giving water. Near 600 feet, water was indeed found (years later, I still marvel at the reality that there is water under *everything* if you're just willing to drill deep enough). But after a few fits and starts, it was clear there was not enough water to do anybody any good.

That sort of setback would have discouraged many folks. Not mine. Another location about 300 yards from the house was witched and another drill began its journey downward, 300...400...500. Around 560 feet, they hit water again. And this time, it didn't peter out. It kept coming. And it wasn't so sandy or brackish that it couldn't be used. The pipe went in, the pump was installed, an insulated pump house was built and pipe to the house was buried deep enough to insure its safety even during the most vicious winter freezes. I do not remember the moment when water first flowed out of a faucet in the house from deep within the Natural Pasture aquifer, but I can only assume it was a source for plenty of celebration. I still marvel at it when it comes streaming out into a sink, relatively free of sand, with usually only the faintest hint of brownish coloring and so mineral rich and hard that it can take an entire bottle of shampoo to come up with a good

handful of suds. But hey, small miracles born of unreasonable amounts of time, money and effort in the middle of nowhere, are not to be taken lightly. And so I do not.

A few words about dry-land farming, a concept that many probably haven't really thought about, and most of those who did quickly discarded as being foolhardy in the extreme. Not unlike building a swimming pool and waiting for the rains to fill it. Well, maybe that's a bit extreme, but the essence of dry-land farming is that you plant your crops in the fall (hardy, drought-resistant grains: any of a dozen varieties of wheat, or occasionally barley) and wait and hope that the rains will come and cause the kernels to sprout, the sprouts to push their way through the soil to the surface, to grow still further, to weather the bitterly harsh winter cold and to eventually shoot up heads which, water permitting, will fill with new kernels that will turn golden in the summer heat and be ready for harvest in July and August. As scientific miracles go, this scenario is still pretty hard to top. And as an act of faith, the effort put forth by a dry-land farmer, betting his livelihood and existence on something as fickle as the weather, would make even the most suicidal Vegas gambler fold his full house and head for the buffet.

And for the record -- knowing full well I intend to reiterate until it becomes my own personal recurring motif -- I am not that good a gambler. I can't pinpoint the moment when I realized I didn't have what it takes to be a dry-land farmer like my father or, thankfully, like my courageous brother (and *his sons!*) who stepped in and relieved me of the onus of pulling the plug on a family farming heritage passed down from one generation to the next. The Natural Pasture continues, long live the Natural Pasture. Let he who is without sin chuck the first dirt clod.

And yet, alien boy miscast as farmhand for a period not to exceed twelve years with NO time off for good behavior -- good behavior is no better than bad behavior if it doesn't RAIN! -- I still look to the hills and watch the clouds, still taste the moisture, or its lack, in the air, still watch the weather maps for the promise of timely showers. In September and October to give the newly-planted crops a head start. In March, to give the newly-thawed out sprouts a chance to send up a shoot tall enough to harvest. And in April and again in May, to keep the heads forming and filling out to their fullest extent. And then NO RAIN in late June into July and throughout harvest so that the ripened and ready grain can be harvested without delay or the possibility of so many late-moisture-related afflictions that it doesn't do anything but depress me to even think about them let alone list them here.

Is this too much to ask of a vast and indifferent weather system, which is a part of a larger natural order...which may or may not have been hopelessly knocked out of balance by shortsighted manmade atrocities...which is then again a tiny pattern of needlepoint on the quilt of earthly existence as seen through God's cataracts gazing haphazardly through his antiquated electron microscope? Is it? To this question, which demands an answer born of faith and fatalism and orneriness in the face of doubt...I say, "Yes."

For me.

This time around.

If I'd stayed on to become a dry-land farmer, by now my ulcers would have ulcers. As it is, I lost my hair. I can only assume I would have lost my scalp as well. My teeth, ground down to nubs from countless nights worrying about that which I cannot

control (like basically everything) would have been replaced with dentures that by now would also have been ground down into so much porcelain dust.

As it is, I look at my brother and his sons with nothing short of awe, continually marveling, "How do they do it?!" Well, okay, for quite a while there, I had to work through "Why do they do it?" But that was when I was laboring under the illusion that there was some other enterprise out there that makes more sense... OPTIMISTS' ALERT: Avert your eyes for the remainder of this sentence: I now know there ISN'T anything that makes more sense.

I remember somebody once telling me that the Eskimos in the frozen north have something like 47 different words for "snow" or "ice" but no generic word for "water." Dry-land farmers have at least 47 different words for the LACK of water, and most of them don't need to be reprinted here since you can hear them on any given night at the Rainbow Tavern in town. Actually, most dry-land farmers are rarely found at the Rainbow for the simple reason that there's always work to be done. And if there isn't work, which is rarely the case, then there are things to be worrying about. And we all know that worrying and drinking are a dangerous combination. First thing you know, you're having to worry about drinking as well.

And what you really want to drink is...water. And if you can't drink it, then why the hell not fish in it.

So let's get back to those three water boundaries, the Neenah, the Wapinitia and the Deschutes. When I was growing up there, the Deschutes was a fisherman's paradise, filled with all manner of fresh-water game fish. You could hike in. You could drive alongside, park and camp. There were even places you could practically fish from your

car. And for my dad, there was Sherar's Bridge. An unassuming bridge crossing a span of the Deschutes about ten miles north of Maupin, Sherar's Bridge was just below Sherar's Falls, which was a favorite location for Native American net fishers who set up their platforms near the falls and helped themselves to the steelhead and salmon that either couldn't muscle their way over the falls or were exhausting themselves in the attempt. In this stretch of the river, the water slashed through a particularly narrow gap between the encroaching rock walls, creating a powerful falls and a merciless series of rapids. It is still conventional river rafter wisdom today to pull your boat out of the water above Sherar's Falls and pack it down past the falls. You don't get a second chance at Sherar's.

But it was also here that, on the rocks across the river from the net fishing platforms, my dad liked to sit with his pole casting out into the pools near the falls and waiting for his bait of salmon roe cured in Borax and tied around his hook with red thread, to attract a snack-hungry salmon or steelhead. During the 1960s, dad brought home, on a pretty regular basis, a rather impressive assortment of fish which I eventually learned to gut and clean before my mother would take them and cook the living hell out of them. Just in case they weren't already dead-dead, she'd bake and poach them within an inch of becoming fish goo. It wasn't until year's later that I realized just what an incredible delicacy salmon or steelhead, when properly prepared, could be. Of course, by then, I could no longer afford them.

But back to the actual fishing. At first, I begged dad to take me along to Sherar's, thinking this would be another great adventure and a kind of escape. Boy, was I wrong. Baking in the sun on those unimaginatively piled up rocks, I could sit and drink in the

stench of bait and fish guts reeking from every crevice near the water's edge and watch as the half-dozen fishermen would climb over the rocks from one hole to the next, then take their place, drop in their line and wait. And wait. And wait. Here, it seems, was my father's chosen form of meditation for this chapter of his later life. To bait. To cast. To sit. And to wait. Of course, there would be the occasional reeling in, the occasional flurry of excitement when someone else got a strike. But above all, Sherar's was about the quiet calm at the center of a Oneness with stinking fish guts and rocks built for anything but comfort. It wasn't long before I stopped begging to be taken along, and I'm sure my dad was all the more grateful for my absence.

And yet the siren song of fishing was still ringing in my ears. And there, RIGHT THERE on the Natural Pasture were three decidedly different fishing experiences just waiting for me. All just a hike away. A long hike down into a canyon, an even longer hike back up. And, heck, even if you didn't catch anything, I reasoned, at least you had a good hike. Wapinitia actually contained the road leading down, across a bridge and up the other side to the cattleguard that separated me from...three more miles of gravel road leading to pavement, with its promise of untold civilized wonders within one-way driving distance.

For this kind of trout fishing, the bait of choice wasn't a brilliantly tied fly. Casting amid brush, trees and basalt outcroppings is limited to a flick of the wrist with the hope the hook will hit the water before getting snarled in an overhanging branch. But with the quest for bait came another link in the great chain of water dependence. In order to round up enough nightcrawlers (the biggest and fattest earthworms around), the garden would first be soaked down during the day. Then, after darkness was well established, out

we'd creep with our flashlights and bait cans, sneaking up on the unsuspecting earthworms who'd pushed their way to the surface and were luxuriating in the dark mud. Much like digging for razor clams at the coast, this operation required stealth and speed. If you were lucky, you could nab the nightcrawler before it could begin its retreat. If you were slow, however, you'd be in for a tug-of-war as the worm wriggled back into the ground. Just another in a long series of barbaric activities that worm lovers from around the world now acknowledge as being tantamount to popping puppies in the microwave. But to an ill-informed, unrepentant ten-year-old thinking only of the greater glory of fishing the next day, going toe-to-toe in the muddy garden with an army of elusive nightcrawlers seemed to make sense.

The bridge across Wapinitia Creek was deceptive. About 30 feet across, it was originally built of railroad ties and overlapping boards that would creek and groan under the weight of a fully-loaded wheat truck, but continued to defy the elements for year after year before eventually being replaced with a serious concrete-reinforced BRIDGE. What's still the same, though, is that a dozen feet below the bridge, for eleven months out of the year, you might see a small trickle of water easing its way through the marshy grass from one still pool to the next. Dormant most of the year, tiny springs along its route to the Deschutes would keep Wapinitia Creek from going totally dry. And yet, there was life to be found there.

A few hundred yards above the bridge was a surprisingly deep and muddy pool, maybe fifty yards long and twenty feet wide, that, for a time, teemed with suckers and catfish. I'd been brought up to think of these two species of fish as being inedible or at least too much trouble to even bother trying to cook or clean. I accepted this as the

wisdom of my elders, and with the exception of one particularly gruesome and messy attempt to filet a decent-sized catfish -- net result of an hour's work: about four unremarkable catfish McNuggets -- I had no use for bottom feeders.

But as one began to venture downstream from the bridge, little flurries of pools would emerge from the rocks and grasses. Occasionally, if one stood very still, it was sometimes possible to actually hear the sound of running water! The quest of the hiker/angler in Wapinitia was to hike three-fourths of the time, fish one-fourth of the time and comfort oneself with the knowledge that going home empty-handed at least meant there was less to haul up out of the canyon at the end of the day.

Eventually, it became clear that the best fishing holes -- and some were literally holes -- were easier to reach by hiking to the rimrock out behind the barn and then making one's way down into the canyon. With pole, lunch basket and bait can, this was always an adventure. And after what seemed like hours of crawling and climbing and untangling, one would hear the rush of a fast-moving trickle as it poured itself into a pool large enough to support at least one legal-length trout. This trout would naturally be no match for the cunning fisherman, but would, as often as not, work its way off the hook while his adversary was trying to extricate his pole from the overhanging branches and get close enough to the water to land the noble fish without actually falling into the water. As you can imagine, the climb back out of Wapinitia Creek was rarely overburdened by much of a catch, and as often as not, the boots made a nasty squish-squash sound every step of the way.

Neenah Creek was even more problematic. All but about maybe a half-mile of Neenah Creek was virtually dead. Not empty, but devoid of fish due to a large pool and

an insurmountable falls that fed into it. The fish who made it to this pool made it no further. And this pool and falls were at the very bottom of the deepest, most demanding canyon hike the Natural Pasture had to offer. A half-hour down, minimum. An hour coming back out, minimum. And yet the first time I made it down to that pool, it seemed alive with fish. True, most of them were suckers or white fish (another bottom feeder that mocked me with its resemblance to a trout in its fight and flash before revealing itself as a bony and generally inedible poseur at the end). But there could be decent-sized trout, even an occasional steelhead or spawning salmon. And let me stress again, the real goal wasn't seeing how many fish you could catch. The goal was the hike, the activity of it all. To do it and said you'd done it. To look down off the rim and know you'd been there. The fish to be caught, such as they were, were really just an excuse. Invariably they disappointed when it came to eating them: too many bones, too little flesh with little or no flavor, and of course, cooked beyond repair.

Hiking down to the railroad tracks that ran along the Deschutes was a different game. The canyon was crisscrossed with cattle trails. I'd chased cows along these enough times to conclude that they basically led from nowhere to nowhere, but at least you knew someone or something had been there before. I can actually only remember one time when we specifically went down to the Deschutes with the intention of fishing. I was probably ten or eleven. The hike down was okay, but the reality of "river" fishing at the bottom was quickly disappointing. Stand, cast, reel in, cast again. The thrill was not only gone for my ten-year-old patience, it never even made an appearance. Lunch was over too quickly and a good chunk of day remained before the trek out. What to do?

I followed the tracks down to the mouth of Wapinitia Creek. A train trestle bounded by concrete abutments set into the shale on either side of the stream mouth seemed intriguing, but the trestle was too short for any fantasies of being trapped in the middle with a train coming -- a recurring childhood fantasy probably pilfered from the "Wonderful World of Disney." But standing on the abutment, gazing down at the trees, the shale, the intersection of creek and river, this had potential. And in my ten-year-old mind, it became my pitcher's mound. A handful of shale pebbles were flung from the abutment as I shook off my catcher's signals then sent one screaming in high and tight. It was a masterful pitching performance, and a good chance to work on my wind-up and delivery. It was while concentrating on the height and extension of my leg kick as I delivered another strike to the plate that I kicked up and out and stepped...off the mound.

There was a sickening moment of realization as my foot disappeared over the lip of the abutment. The steeply-raked shale-covered hillside some ten feet below beckoned up at me and I did the only thing I could do: I jerked my foot back. As my heel snagged under the abutment lip, I immediately went from stepping over the edge to catapulting myself head over heels. In a single move, I was parallel to the concrete wall, falling headfirst toward the shale below. There was just enough time to lift my arm to cover my face, and I plowed into the rocks at the bottom. So straight was my fall that I found myself momentarily suspended in a kind of clumsy headstand, leaning against the wall. And then I was falling over and sliding down the hill in a daze. Groggy but still conscious, I checked for damage. My cheek was warm with blood. A large chunk of shale had grazed it. Had I landed an inch to the right, it probably would have been imbedded in my face. In fact, my forearm and elbow had sustained the bulk of the fall. Both were

scraped and my elbow was bleeding rather dramatically. This took some getting used to, so I sat there watching it bleed, fighting dizziness and feeling more than a little stupid. At least my legs were unhurt, so I'd be able to hike back out. But for now, there was all this blood...

And then it stopped, or nearly. And I stood up and wandered off in search of the fishermen who would lead me back up out of the canyon. By the time I found them, I was beginning to enjoy the drama of it, especially now that I'd concluded I wasn't going to bleed to death at the bottom of a train trestle at the mouth of Wapinitia Creek.

Years later, as an adult, I would watch "A River Runs Through It" and think of my own indoctrination to the concept of sport fishing as an adjunct to personal philosophy. The part of me that will forever feel alien in the presence of natural poetry and physical harmony longed for such an alternative rite of familial bonding, the formation of a spiritual code and a deeply personal communion with nature. The part of me that remembered the boredom, stench and endlessly diverse ironies of fishing the Deschutes, Wapinitia and Neenah, could only sigh and lament, "Not in my lifetime."

And yet the "Call of the Wet" is still in my dry-land blood, still daring me to see how long I can live with thirst, still taunting me with its "you don't control squat" indifference, and still daring me to look deep inside myself and listen to the tiny inner voice forever whispering, "Roll the dice, Dry-Land Farm Boy!"

*

Copyright © 2010 by Dan Duling