A Christmas dinner that changed a life

BY RONALD SLATER

As Christmas is nearing and I watch the snow, I'm reminded of years long when I was a boy of 16 in the year 1959. I'm also reminded of my age now, 60 years, and my own mortality, and I realize my story must somehow be written.

I came to your country in June, 1959 after being hired by a rancher named Adams. He came all the way to Seattle to pick me up and my friend Dick M., also. We felt very special.

My pay was $5 a day and room and board. Very quickly I was introduced to miles and miles of fence mending and repair. The work was very hard especially in rock. After a month or so I finally started cattle roundup and working with horses. I loved it; today, I still have horses.

While loading calves into the branding shoots I was kicked by a calf and received a serious broken nose. They packed my nose and finally the bleeding stopped. I was told to stand by and later I would be taken to the doctor in Big Timber, around 50 miles away.

I decided to climb up on a rock hill to get a better picture of the roundup and branding. The rocks were smooth enough for me to slide on my chest, pulling myself forward. Little did I realize the danger that was waiting.

Just as I raised my head to regain my balance, a rattlesnake with fifteen beads — four and a half feet long, green in color — struck out. The head of the snake was so close to my cheek that I felt a small gust of wind pass my face.

As the snake struck again, I jerked back hard enough to start my fall all the way down the rocky hill. I now had a broke nose, bleeding head, and a shock so violent I could do nothing but bleed and sob.

Later on, in the U.S. Navy and Army, I would witness grown men in fear and danger sob and reel the same way. I never felt ashamed of weeping again.

Mr. Adams later would fire me for a bad attitude. The lack of steady food had made this job very unpleasant.

I found myself on the streets of Big Timber taking different odd jobs, playing cowboy, riding the trains, and trying to meet every girl around. It was a summer of complete intoxication.

Around July of 1959 I was in the minor section of the Grand Hotel when I met a young girl from Livingston. This girl of 16 rode horses, wore Levi's, and had the freshness of Ivory Soap. There is a time in every boy's life when he is given the privilege, the sacred opportunity, to have a mind-branding encounter with a girl so personal that nothing before or after this brief episode of life could ever change it.

I will take her memory, and the memory of my wife of 43 years, to my grave with sincere humble gratitude.

I would see this girl until the end of August when she told me they would be camping in Yellowstone on the Madison River for a few weeks. We said our goodbyes.

I was awaken around 11:30p.m. by a severe earthquake. I found out later the mountain above their campsite came down and buried over 28 people. I would never feel her breath, her body, or smell her fragrance again. I had never felt such pain.

I returned to Seattle in September of that year.

As a school dropout I returned to Big Timber in November, 1959 to possibly find work. As my money and employment prospects disappeared, I landed a job at the Farmer's Coop. My boss was named Bob Elgas. This man would change my life forever.

During the day I would load feed and do cleanup. At night I came through the fire exit at the Grand Hotel and would steal a room or free bath. My wages barely paid for food.

On Christmas Day, 1959, Bob Elgas invited me for dinner. I weighed 120 pounds and was very skinny. On that day I would find a present under their tree, ice skate on their pond, and eat Canada goose. I would be shown how to exercise, muscle up, and I received a strong warning on my lack of education and achievement.

Little did they know of the neglect and abuse I had received for so long. Little did they know of the hunger.

On two occasions over the last 43 years I called Bob Elgas. I told him of my failure as a Navy diver, and my success as a helicopter flight instructor. Later I would become a Heavy Equipment Contractor - Superintendent and land developer.

I served in both the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Army honorably. I currently own a 233 acre development. Because of my good taste in women, I have been married 43 years and put two girls through college. They live just down the street but received a lot of my anger. I became a lifetime body builder and competed in Karate.

Big Timber showed me life was not going to be easy. It wasn't ever going to be a cake walk.

But sometimes, when I smell the fragrance of Ivory Soap or see a young girl of 16 in Levis, I'm reminded of long ago when my confidence, self esteem and desire would leap forward as I heard her words, "I've been waiting for you for a long, long time", after I said, "I apologize for loving you."

Mr. Slater lives in Cle Elum, Washington. He plans to meet with Bob Elgas, who now resides in Oregon, in the near future.

Crystal Morning Memory

By PAMELA DIMERCURIO

Lacy, fragile ice crystals tenaciously cling to the window sashes as the morning sun arises in the East. The sky is cloudless and blue and fair after its evening gray dusting of snowflakes. It is pure and innocent. The ground is glistening with captured sunlight, thousands upon thousands of twinkling gold flecks shimmer and small icicles begin to weep on the eves of the countless dwellings in this small winter wonderland called Big Timber, Montana.

I'd forgotten how much I missed the snow and its Crystalline beauty that transforms everything it touches with its grace and white light purity. A rusty junkyard is suddenly a fairyland of white and wondrous shapes unrecognizable with a blanket of fluffy white frosting.

This morning as I gazed out of my bedroom window I remembered that magical night in the mountains of Northern California. We had decided to walk from Silver Fork to Kyburz to see my Grandfather at work at an Inn up the road about a mile from our cabin.

I was eight years old, and in that age before television, and before Santa Claus became just a legend of Christmas. My Great Aunt Lou was visiting from the valley; my Aunt Laverne was there along with my Grandmother Lela.

It was still on this night, so still you could hear the infinitesimal sashay of a giant snowflake as it would glide close to your ear, even though that ear was half covered by a stocking-hat.

Giant pine trees lined the main highway now covered with snow, so that it looked like a small path in an enchanted forest beckoning us forward. With flakes softly descending, crunching and squeaking slightly under foot, the now hard-packed snow lent some small sound as we joyfully trudged toward our wintry destination.

As we walked we tried to capture a few of those crystalline wonders onto our occasionally protruding tongues, this act momentarily transforming all of us into laughing children. This was a memory from childhood I savor each time the weather brings those silent sentinels of crystal wonder that blanket this pristine place called Big Sky Country, Montana.

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What the CDC does for you

By ELLIE URSINO PA-C

We have been hearing news lately about the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) as being experts on the flu vaccinations and other illnesses throughout the country and the world.

The CDC is the main agency that monitors specific infectious diseases affecting people and animals. This government-run agency offers "services and facilities for the investigation, identification, prevention and control of disease." It also plays a role in the environmental health of citizens at home, outside and in the workplace.

The main control center is in Atlanta, Georgia and it is a branch of the Department of Health and Human Services. The CDC director and primary spokesperson is Dr. Julie Gerberding, who we have seen much of in the past two years regarding the anthrax scare and, more recently, educating about the flu virus and immunizations.

The CDC has 12 different departments which work together to help promote education, set standards of health, conduct research to help prevent outbreaks and the controlling of infections and mysterious diseases, and set up immunization recommendations. The different departments include:

- National Center of Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities
- National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
- National Center for Environmental Health
- National Center for Health Statistics
- National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention
- National Center for Infectious Disease
- National Center for Injury Prevention and Control
- National Center for Occupational Safety and Health
- National Immunization Program
- Epidemiology Program Office
- Public Health Practice Program
- Office of the Director

The CDC also looks at epidemic areas around the world for illness and helps travelers get information. There are CDC workers in many countries that are assessing outbreaks, resistance to certain treatments, and monitoring disease in locals and tourists plus any threat of getting a particular illness.

For example, malaria is still very common in third world countries and tropical areas. Before visiting a particular area, the CDC can give information as to what preventative medicine should be taken, if there is resistance to common preventative medicines, and what treatment may be needed if infected.

Another example is to help travelers decide whether they need immunizations against certain diseases before going to a particular country.

Updates are constantly being organized on the CDC web site to help inform people about changing risks. The CDC is also working to maintain goals of Healthy People in a Healthy World, which is their projection of the future.

If you have any questions, or are interested in public health, disease prevention or progression and recommendations by the Centers for Disease Control, their website address is www.cdc.gov.

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