

LOSING SOLITUDE

By Martin Murie



MOUNTAIN RESCUE

One summer I was a "Ninety Day Wonder," ranger in Teton National Park. A career ranger from the park drove into the ranch one evening to report an injured climber. He asked if I had a climbing rope.

"Yes."

"Bring it along."

I fetched the rope and my pack and ice axe. Away we went to a dark meadow where horses were being saddled for the rescue. The horses, accustomed to hauling tourists into the mountains, stood placidly as we climbers climbed into the saddles, our packs on our backs. Riding instead of walking was supposed to save our energy for the tough work ahead.

The horses plodded along the switchbacks built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during Great Depression days. It took all night for the horses to reach the place where cliffs stopped them. We stepped down, stiff and sore.

I'll call this Error Number One: Don't put climbers with packs on their backs on horses. Dawn was breaking.

Four of us shouldered our packs and picked up the evacuation toboggan. We were led by Glen Exum, who had grown up on a farm on the Idaho side of the range. One day he decided to climb the Grand Teton. He set off in ordinary farm clothes and shoes, got to the top, returned.

Piece of cake.



Improvisation was the way things were done that summer, using experienced climbing guides--Petzold and Exum--for expertise and leadership.

Later he discovered a risky new route now known as the Exum route, then hurried down the east side to play in a dance band. That's another story.

Well, Glen and Howie and another climber whose name I've forgotten, and I climbed down to the rock debris in front of Teton Glacier. Along the way a discussion took place about a new route up the north face of the Grand. Then we tackled the rocky slope. No problem, until Howie stumbled over a rock and it rolled and we had to dodge it. Glen mumbled, "Howie, you damn farmer."

I'll call this Error Number Two. Don't roll rocks.

We reached the injured climber and confirmed that, instead of rappelling with a new sling rope, he had decided to trust an old sling rope left by a previous climber. That rope, weathered for unknown months or even years, broke. The foolish climber was lucky to meet injuries instead of death.

Error Number Three: Never, never trust an old sling rope.

A woman stayed with him all night while a man rushed down to park headquarters to ask for help. We strapped the injured man into the evacuation toboggan and set off down the slope. By the way, the Park was not yet thoroughly organized for mountain rescue.

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We soon came to a long, steep summer snowfield. I drove my ice axe into the snow, looped the rope once around the handle and got ready to belay Glen and the toboggan. Glen hitched the rope to the toboggan, straddled it, gave me a signal. I began to belay him. Too slow for Glen's taste. He yelled, "Turn it loose." Reluctantly, I freed the rope and off Glen and the toboggan went, sashaying down the snowfield, trailing my rope.

Glen was a good jockey, slowed in time at the rocky termination of the snow, but I will name this Error Number Four.

We got the toboggan onto a horse and the horse concessionaires and rangers escorted the horses down those tedious switchbacks. Slow day ahead. The climber survived, returned next year for more climbing adventure. Or errors?

SKIING TO THE TOP

Here's a more joyful mountain story. Olaus, my dad, drove me to the mouth of Curtis Canyon, the most direct approach to the top of Jackson peak. I was on skis and had a sleeping bag in my pack and some food, in case the climb would turn out to be an overnight.

It was easy, except for very deep snow in the bottom of Curtis Canyon. Once I got above timberline the going got better and better. Crusted snow that held my weight with a light powder snow surface. Just right.

I reached the top and opened the cannister in the cairn built by the U. S. Geological Survey, discovered that I'd forgotten to bring a pencil to write my name as the first to ski to the top. For a while I regretted that, but later I got over the "firstness" thing. First white man to reach the north pole? What's so great about that? Inuit had been all over that snow and ice for thousands of years. Admiral Byrd's air flights at the South Pole? Penguins have been there for ages.

The real reward was the ski down the powdered crust, swooping down and down, making perfect turns on the perfect surface, rhythm entering muscles and tendons and brain as you calculate each turn, moderate your speed a bit, because, after all, this is a ridge bounded by cliffs. No errors, except not bringing a pencil. A perfect mountain climb.

SMOKED OUT

We begged a ride to the north border of Jackson's Hole, near Yellowstone. Harold's dad had a one-room trapper cabin there, and a "trapping territory" permit from the Forest Service. Martens and minks, in the winter.

Beautiful warm day. We went immediately to the marshy creek, looking for fish. Harold and Harry were skillful, fish-crazed kids. I had a bow. We spotted a duck on the opposite bank of the creek. I shot an arrow, missed. The duck vamoosed. We continued to explore, found a recently butchered moose. Out of season poachers. I managed to hit a chipmunk with an arrow, saved it to cook for supper.

In the afternoon we walked along the narrow car track in the woods. Harry, who had a powerful long arm and deadly accuracy threw a stone at a marten and knocked it out of a tree. It scrambled away, unhurt.

Returning to the cabin we caught a few frogs to fry along with the chipmunk.

Late in the afternoon, near dark, Fred Deyo, Game Warden and his deputy, drove their pickup to the cabin and asked us if we'd seen any sign of moose poachers. Proudly, we told of our find, an out-of-season moose kill. The wardens went off to check out the moose, returned, spread a big tarp on the ground, piled groceries on the tarp and began to cook thick steaks on a portable stove. I moved into the cabin to prepare our own supper on the wood-burning stove. Found a frying pan, skinned the frogs and the chipmunk,

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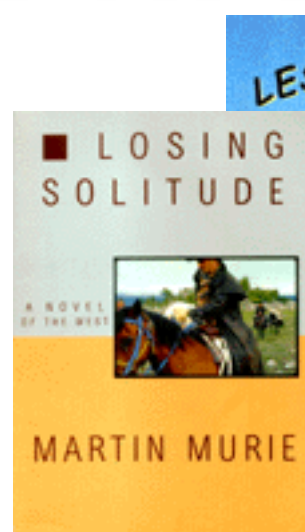
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added a bit of grease and began cooking. They were nearly done when I noticed the stove was smoking badly. More than that, the cabin was filling with smoke. I stumbled to the door, noticed Fred and the deputy laughing. I knew right away what had happened. Fred's trickster habits were well-known throughout Teton county. Sure enough, there was a flat stone on top of the stove pipe. My comrades were laughing too. I climbed onto the roof and threw the stone away, went back into the cabin, finished the cooking job.

The chipmunk tasted really good, the frog legs didn't. Bloodthirsty kids on a rampage? I suppose we were.

After we grew up and fought in a war, we lost that. In recent years I have trapped woodchucks that are a threat to gardens, in live traps, and then transported them far away to release them on someone else's property.

Here are a few more tales from Fred Deyo's long trickster career. Once, on a steep grade, a big truck in low gear ahead of the car and Fred fretting in the car's passenger seat, pulled out his sidearm, leaned out of the window, fired two or three shots alongside the right side of the truck. He knew perfectly well that a truck that size couldn't possibly speed up, but Fred's restless nature dictated that he do something.

Another time he and his wife, Pearl, were saddled up, ready to ride somewhere. Pearl was in the saddle, Fred on the ground. A devil took control of Fred, he slapped the horse hard on its hind quarters and the horse gave a sudden lunge. Fortunately, Pearl was a good rider, rode it out.

I look back, amazed at our "innocence" in that remote mountain valley, even as some of our major corporations were doing business with the Nazis.

Fred was not the only restless cowboy who couldn't stay still for the entire course of a movie. He seldom went to movies, missed the fake glamor. So, we find Fred, as Game Warden, in his office, elk and deer season, selling licences to a lineup of young Civilian Conservation Corps men. Clark Gable was in the lineup too. Fred, perhaps noticing that Gable looked a little too old for a CCC, asked him if he was another CCC "boy."

Gable, offended, said, "I am Clark Gable."

Fred roared, "Well, who the hell's Clark Gable?"

Do I have space for another one? Okay, Fred loved to wrestle, but he met his match in an argument with a rancher. The rancher pinned him. Fred got up, happened to toe a gunny sack that felt sort of squishy. He investigated. "Looks like I'll have to fine you. Fishing out of season."

One more? Fred shot a rancher's dog who had been chasing elk on the Elk Refuge. The rancher, enraged, reached for his shotgun. Fred drew his pistol, shot the rancher. Fred stood trial. Fortunately, the rancher survived, Fred got off on a self defense plea.

Moral? A trickster's life can be hazardous.

PREDATOR AND REAPER

Writing those stories forced me to look at where we are now--- the use of drones launched on the Pakistan/Afghanistan border for use against terrorists (a blanket title that includes all forms of resistance to our occupation, not al Qaeda alone). Our drones are named Predator and Reaper. They are launched on the borderlands and then the controls are turned over to "pilots" based at Creech Air Force Base in Indian Springs, Nevada. Civilian deaths are classified as "collateral damage" by our own military. How many wounded? We are not told. How many die later? How many crippled for life?

I do balk at all civilian deaths being classed as "innocent," because some civilians probably support al Qaeda militants and the Taliban and other resistances to our occupation of their lands. Just as in Nazi Germany and other occupied nations, many civilians died in struggle with Nazi forces. The same resistance occurred in Nazi-occupied nations, such as Norway, Yugoslavia, Poland and others, in spite of Nazi retaliations against innocent people. Plans are afoot now, in Pentagon/corporate discussions, to build drones that can make their own decisions--bomb or not bomb. Is this reality out-doing fiction?

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Davey Jackson, by the way, was a beaver fur entrepreneur whose favorite "hole" (valley) was given his name by his mountain men.

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