

LOSING SOLITUDE

By Martin Murie

More Stories from Early Jackson's Hole

It's late evening, by a lake in a forest far from highway roar; the south-west quarter of Yellowstone Park. A pair of swans are cruising along the far shore. We speak in low tones. We hope that these swans will bring forth cygnets. We have a proprietary interest; we are humans alert to the endangered status of those birds; so few of them are still alive. We want them to be with us as we go into our destiny.

We turn and walk toward the skimpy marshland that surrounds the lake. Suddenly the swans are aloft, flying directly toward us. They are big, heavy birds, boldly white in the dusky air, their beaks completely black, winging their way in total confidence, as though pegging us as harmless earthbound creatures. We stand still, hardly believing they are so low, so near. We hear their wings, and then they sound off, first one trumpeter, then the other, loud, resonant. A few notes only. Their low clear voices linger in the forest; notions of human proprietorship vanish, as though the swans have opened the past from which their kind came, long ago. Pleistocene and beyond. We were in those times; our ancestors were there with The Others.

I remembered that encounter, later; still a kid, when my dad, Olaus, and my uncle Adolph, escorted an expert from the east with huge field glasses to a small lake in the far northern regions of Jackson's Hole.

I didn't realize at the time that he was studying intently the faraway beaks for sign of Whistling Swan yellow marks. They aren't there. He lowered the field glasses. "They are Trumpeters!" cried out the bird expert. He was so excited that he jumped up and down in his puttees. I was fascinated by the ornithologist's puttees; they reached almost to his knees, made of shiny leather. Levis were the almost universal trousers in Jackson's Hole at that time, work-a-day garb for both men and women.



A short time later, Almer Nelson, Manager of the Elk Refuge, called Olaus and asked if we could help transport three trumpeter swans to a wide area of Flat Creek, on the refuge. The birds came from Montana. Once we were on Refuge land, Almer handed Olaus and me each a swan, swathed in a burlap sack. I managed to grab the neck just behind the head. My right arm took all the weight of the body. It was a big bird, as were the two Almer and Olaus carried. Fortunately the area of Flat Creek Almer had chosen for the release point was only a half mile away. I managed to carry my Trumpeter that far. Without a word we three carried the birds to the creek, took off the burlap bags, and released them. I noticed, with wonder, how lightly they floated on the water. They were calm, allowing us to stand there and observe them. We left them there and walked back to Almer's van.

Every resident in Teton County knew that "Park Extension" meant the enlargement of Teton Park to provide a foreground for the spectacular Teton Range. One of the Rockefellers fell in love with the valley and set up a funds outfit in Utah and hired Dick Winger, a valley resident, to buy out cattle and dude ranches at a price most owners couldn't turn down.

Year-by-year Winger bought land. In those days Jackson's Hole was considered a cow town, with a bare sprinkling of dude ranches. If the citizens of Jackson's Hole could have noticed, they'd have lamented that Jackson was turning quickly into a tourist town. There was still the rodeo, and bars on the town square. But Jackson's Hole was becoming a flamboyant ski center, like Sun Valley in Idaho and Aspen in Colorado. Only Spring Gulch, in the southern part of the valley, continued the big ranch traditions. Finally Winger finally notified Rockefeller that he had accumulated enough land, with a few enclaves, for Rockefeller to make a gift to the federal government.

Rockefeller let FDR know that he could no longer afford the taxes on all that land (Ho! Ho!). FDR took advantage of his power to create National Monuments; he presented the Feds with the Jackson Hole National Monument, and accepted the gift of land. Later, without much fanfare, the land that Winger had so laboriously bought was merged with Teton National Park, meeting in most places with the National Forest boundary on the east and the slender line of lakes that fronted the Tetons on the west.

After the war, I got a position as a "Ninety Day Wonder," a summer hire at the Monu-

www.packratnest.com
packrat7881@att.net



ment. I hitchhiked between the Park and the ranch that Olaus and Mardy, Weezy and Adolph had borrowed money to buy. One day Wallace Beery picked me up. I told him that I was a "ninety day wonder" and he told me that he was starring in a movie set in Jackson's Hole. He let me out at Moose Post Office and I walked the dirt road to the ranch.

The Spring Gulch ranchers gathered a herd of heifers and calves and a bull or two and drove them onto National Monument Land. The Teton Park rangers lined up on the highway and watched. The Spring Gulch ranchers were serious; everybody had pistols, even Wallace Beery, who had joined them for the fight that didn't take place. The Spring Gulch ranchers did not know that their grazing rights on the Monument had been 'grandfathered' in. They had safe grazing for their cattle. As proof of that, I was a passenger, Robert Hansen driving, with a huge bull, destined for a career inseminating heifers in

CCC boys were lined up in Fred's home office, buying hunting licenses. Clark Gable was among them. Fred looked up, said, "You're too old to be a CCC. What's your name?" "I'm Clark Gable," confident that the entire world would recognize the name. "Well, who the hell's Clark Gable?"

the Gros Ventre area, beside me in the truck. Robert was a classmate of mine in High School, youngest son of Pete Hansen, one of the most vehement of the big ranchers, a leader in their pushing cattle onto Monument land. His oldest son, who later became a Wyoming senator, and Parthenia, his grown daughter, were equally defenders of their grazing rights. Well, their grazing rights were protected and the cattle drive met no resistance from the park rangers. So, meeting no opposition, they drove their cattle back to the ranches and on the way they pulled out their pistols and shot at ground squirrels ("chislers" in Wyoming language). Pistols are notorious for unreliability, except at close range. I have no idea if any "chislers" were hit, but a good time was had by all, including Wallace Beery, and it wasn't long before the big ranchers learned that their summer grazing rights were intact.

Almer Nelson was invited to the meeting at banker Buckenroth's modest house. On the way home, he stopped at the Murie house to narrate what went on. "Buck" was against the extension of the Park. He was on the phone, getting more upset. He hung up and stepped on the tail of the house cat, who went yowling off into another room. Almer laughed at that; it seemed to be an appropriate match for Buck's anger. All was not well at the meeting. The Federal government was too lofty an opponent, especially given the legal status of the President's power to create National Monuments. Olaus laughed at the cat story too.

Another tale of Fred Deyo. This story was told to me as an example of the childish nature of the inner school boy lurking in Fred's hidden nature.

Having installed Pearl, Fred's wife, on a gentle horse, Fred, on his way back to his own mount, gave a powerful slap on Pearl's horse's left rump. The horse, in spite of its being trained to gentleness, exploded. Fortunately, Pearl had her boots firmly in the stirrups, and a good horse woman, rode out her horse's momentary lapse. It was only a couple of jumps; Pearl kept her seat in the saddle and her feet in the stirrups. But why did Fred give in to the childish imp residing in his nature? He surely didn't want Pearl's death on the rocky ground; later, he placed all the blame on the horse.

I prefer that imp who emerged from time to time. He knew Pearl would keep her seat in the saddle, but couldn't resist the impulse for some fun.

I had had my own intimate experience with Fred's little imp and on that basis I rest my case.



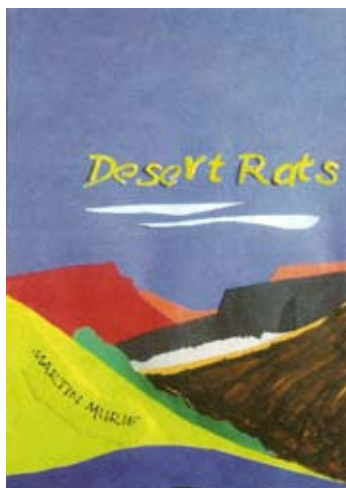
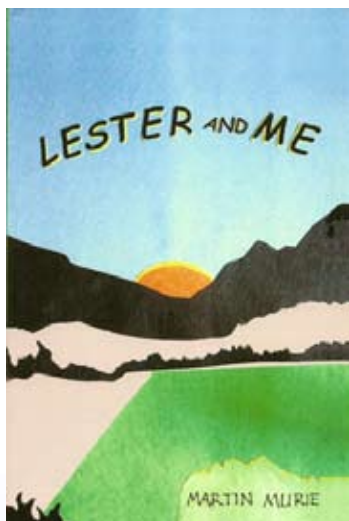
Another incident, please. CCC boys were lined up in Fred's home office, buying hunting licenses. Clark Gable was among them. Fred looked up, said, "You're too old to be a CCC. What's your name?"

"I'm Clark Gable," confident that the entire world would recognize the name.

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

This was Fred's fault. He was one of the few grown men in the valley who became bored when caught in a movie theatre. Almer Nelson was another man who didn't watch many movies. He preferred real incidents to

laugh at, and he found plenty of those.



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On Sheep Mountain in Jackson's Hole. 1930s



Olaus had intimated to Otto Geist, an old family friend, an interest in prehistoric dogs. Otto was doing a dig in an old settlement. Two or three skulls would be enough; he would compare them with modern dogs. But Otto did things by extremes. Dozens of skulls arrived, and two live St. Lawrence Island huskies, a female, Diomedea, and a male, Ungyuk. Diomedea became pregnant and brought forth three husky pups. The pack lived in a pen at our house, where it was my job to feed them. I was still in grade school.

My Aunt Clara worked at the Post Office so she knew just about everybody in Jackson. She arranged for me to pick up waste food at the hospital to feed the dogs. I took my toy sled to the place where kitchen scraps were placed in a special garbage can. Why the dogs and I didn't come down with various diseases, I don't know. Perhaps our immune systems were fully operating. Or perhaps the kitchen staff did something else with food left over from patients with communicable diseases. The five dogs wolfed down the food I brought. I didn't know that they considered me a member of the pack until a strange event occurred.

One day, the dogs escaped and ran after the huge elk herd on the adjacent Elk Refuge. I ran after them until I realized it was hopeless. I lay down in the snow, thinking I'd never get the dogs back and that Almer would be furious, and I cried out of sheer frustration. In a few minutes I felt tongues licking my face and hands. They were all there, having given up their chase of elk; they returned to me as they would to a member of the pack! I grabbed a couple of collars and we all returned home.

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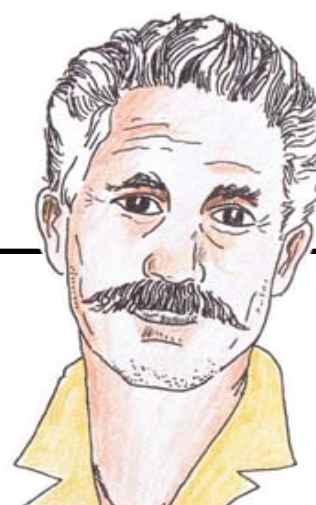
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