

A True Story About a Book Store

We're beginning the story in From My Shelf book store in downtown, center city Wellsboro several weeks ago. I was there to pick up a copy of A Homesteaders Son, a book by an old friend whose family had befriended Janet and I just after we arrived on the Colville Indian Reservation. It was far away from here, many years ago in a land of big mountains, deep snows, Indians, ranchers, and we were just beginning our lives together. I was a newly minted federal forester and Janet, a teacher.

Don McClure, the rancher who had written that book, had just passed recently and we wondered how the McClure family was doing. I Googled the family and talked with a son...and then I ordered The Homesteader's Son (which Don had written many years ago) from My Shelf since I had lost my copy somewhere.

So, a week or so later I asked Casey at My Shelf if my copy of A Homesteader's Son had come in and she said it had. She handed it to me and I opened up the front cover page. On the inside of that page it said, "Kerry and Janet....Memories last a lifetime.....Best Wishes...Don McClure....2003."

At first, disbelief. The thoughts going through my head were tangled. We had that book at some point in our lives and gave it to someone to read and it disappeared. When I realized what had happened (or at least I think I did), I asked Casey where she had ordered the book from. Being a very organized lady, she came back

with “from a thrift store somewhere in the Midwest”. I showed her the inside cover. Now it was her turn for a mind bend.

The “Colville” or “the Res” as many called it, was an isolated place in northern Washington above Coulee Dam where eleven or so tribes (including Chief Joseph and his Nes Perce) had been herded quite literally in the late 1800s. It was an area of the West our government did not want....until they did.

Nespelem, the village near where we lived on the “Agency” and also Joseph’s grave site, was in the high prairie. I would be working in the timber at higher elevations throughout the Res.

We lived in the National Health Service quarters in a small village of folks from all over including other foresters, local native American employees, and even an American Japanese family who befriended us and taught Janet how to make “Chinese food.” It was a different world for us. We learned some new things. For example, this older Japanese American couple had once lived in the Santa Anita racetrack stables as “Internees.” We at first did not understand what they were telling us. Neither of us had heard that from our history books or at home...

I can’t even remember how we originally met the McClures, but I do remember an early invite to a dinner with the McClures and Doodles, the Indian game warden and his wife at Doodle’s home. These two families were close friends. Little did I realize how close. Shortly after we began eating our dessert, there was some quick movement and then complete silence. I looked at Don who had a piece of cherry pie splattered on his face and then at Doodles who had a certain kind of smile on his. Both wives had what I would call “smirks” on theirs.

We waited for someone to get up and begin fighting. Instead everyone erupted in laughter. Janet and I looked at each other? Then all of them began to explain at the same time. Mixed into that piece of cherry pie straddling Don's face was a set of beaver castors (i.e. beaver balls for the less familiar with trapping beavers). It seems that it was an annual ritual for these things to be snuck into something edible once a year.

Why castors you ask? Well, it also seems that they (Don and Doodles) had an agreement concerning beaver which Don caught and Doodles skinned and hooped to dry, whilst Don gave Doodle's family a gallon of milk...a great bartering agreement of many years. Of course, the castors were a byproduct of this. We realized that the humor here was a bit different. We fit right into that, although much of the humor was a bit more subtle, like the old wood cook stove sitting at the entrance to their ranch with a sign on it saying, "Open Range."

There were many facets of this relationship with the McClures. Friends worked and played with the family. We went on hiking/horse packing trips into the high Pasayten Wilderness of the North Cascades with them.

We were asked to help with herding/branding of calves down on the Columbia lowlands with hundreds of cows calling out as we branded their calves and put children (mostly Native American kids) on them for a brief "bull" ride. Janet did the family cooking during this event since Gerry, Don's other half, was doing a zillion other things.

We went to Indian powwows and witnessed the wild and dangerous "Stampede", an Indian rodeo with a race through the wild,

rocky hills above the rodeo grounds, and horses going down with riders and some horses not getting up.

We saw life very differently as a result of those relationships. Some of it quite harsh, like the numbers of dead, open range horses after a deep snow winter or attempting to trap a cougar (who was enjoying many sheep meals) as an apprentice with Doodles and only getting belly fur...I still have a pile of sheds from mule and whitetails caught in deep snows which I would lug out at the end of a day, stuck in my belt while cruising timber. It was a remote and beautiful world and here was a pretty diverse group of folks living in it. And then we were gone from it.

In the early 90s I took our youngest in an old truck (to be delivered to a relative in Oregon) to school at U. of WA in Seattle via the Res and arrived at the McClure's home with no warning. Don was just going out the door and looked at us and smiled. Then he said, "How would you gents like to go herd some cattle and calves off Indian land before someone shoots them?" Of course we said yes, nodding our heads up and down while realizing that we would probably die. We didn't, but our horses knew what they were doing. We swam a small river and pushed cows and calves out of riverside brush, with Don yelling directions at us. My son Raed, at one point said, "Dad, I think he really wants us to do that." It was funny later.

That was the last time I had seen the McClure family which brings us back to From My Shelf Books and the long ago signature from Don. It made me realize how much I missed that life and just how much a book store can help that memory.