

A Place to Lay My Head

And Jesus saith unto him, the foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.

Matthew 8:20

Joe A. Moreland



The author with one of the family's calves.

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ISBN 978-1-105-33720-8

The names of some characters have been changed to protect their personal privacy and identities.

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Published in the United States of America, 2011, Lulu.com.

Note from the Author

One of the biggest regrets of my life is the fact that I had very little interest in my family history when I was young. By the time I became curious about the lives of my ancestors, most had passed on. I can recall a few tales like the mysterious circumstances of my maternal grandfather's murder at the hand of his brother-in-law (ruled an act of self defense by a sympathetic jury), but I never thought to seek more information about any of my relatives.

I played "Blue Bells of Scotland" on my trumpet for an aging great aunt when I was 12 years old. Even though I knew she was born on the Oregon Trail, I never asked her a single question. But today, I would give anything to hear her tell tales about living among Native Americans and carving a life out of the wilderness that was then the Oregon Territory.

My primary motivation for writing this book was to leave a chronicle of my younger years in case any of my grandchildren ever want to know how I lived as a young boy. I hope they find some of my anecdotes enlightening and interesting. This book is for them, should they ever wonder about their family history.

Acknowledgments

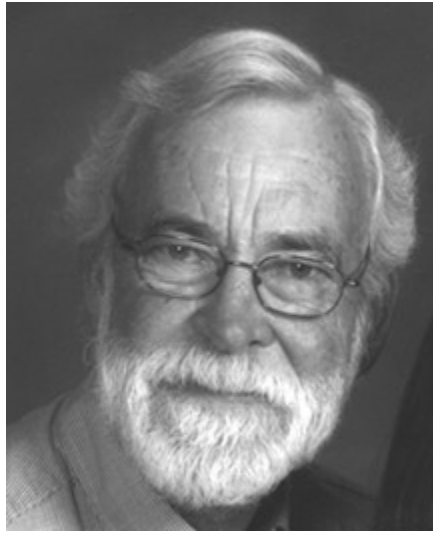
This book might never have reached fruition without the support and urging of my wife, Kay L. Moreland. Not only did she encourage me to document the tales of my youth, she carefully read every word, made numerous corrections, and offered many useful suggestions. I am forever indebted to her.

About the Author

Born in Hermiston, Oregon in 1943, Joe A. Moreland spent most of his adolescent years living in and around the Coast Range of Western Oregon. He attended Oregon State University and earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Physics in 1965. After graduating, he was employed as a hydrologist with the U.S. Geological Survey. He conducted groundwater investigations in California and Idaho and served as a supervisory hydrologist in Idaho and Montana. In 1995, he was selected to serve as the Chief of the Ground Water Research Project in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates--a cooperative program between the U.S. Geological Survey and the National Drilling Company of Abu Dhabi. He retired in 1999 and moved to Orange County, California with his wife Kay.

Although the author published more than 35 scientific and technical reports during his career, this book is his first serious attempt at creative nonfiction writing. He has 4 children, 2 step-children, and 10 grandchildren who he

hopes will enjoy the tales he tells of his brothers and him living on the rough fringes of society where electricity and running water were conveniences not available to those who lived at the end of the road in the late 1940s and 1950s.



The author, Joe A. Moreland.

Prologue

If asked, I'm apt to say that my first real memory was being stuck on the side of the road when our truck's front tire went flat. My family was sitting on top of the Blue Mountains in eastern Oregon on our way to Umatilla. We had left Payette, Idaho and were heading for a remote mountain town named Curlew in northeastern Washington, just a few miles from the Canadian border. Along for the trip were: 1) Grandpa, my father's father--everyone called him Pap, but his name was Lester; 2) Daddy--Pud to all the adults--named Lorris, really!; 3) Momma, or Tookie, as she was called--real name, Jessie Jane--supposedly named after Jesse James; 4) my 6-year old big brother, Edward--nicknamed June Bug but usually called Bugs; 5) yours truly, 4-year old Joe--no special nicknames but sometimes called Jody; and 6) 2-year old brother Duane--Edward called him Duaney most of the time. We were stopping in Umatilla, Oregon to see my Aunt Jo (Momma's older sister Emily) one last time before losing ourselves in the remote hills of northeastern Washington. If we hadn't had a flat tire that afternoon, we would already have been there.

I suppose I should explain our mode of transportation. Daddy had traded a team of horses for a Model A Ford truck that he thought would fit our nomadic lifestyle. He had removed the sideboards and built a crude plywood box on the back that resembled the cabover, slide-in campers which are so popular with pickup owners today. His looked totally handmade--which, of course, it was. He installed small windows on each side for light and attached a door to the back with leather hinges. The whole assembly was covered with green tarpaper roofing to keep out the rain. Even in those days, it was a strange looking contraption that drew stares wherever we went.

We were moving lock-stock-and-barrel so the truck was filled with all of our worldly possessions. Momma's cook stove took up most of the space, but she also had a treadle Singer sewing machine, an ancient hump-topped steamer trunk (which contained all of the family treasures), and a set of cast aluminum cooking pots. Daddy's things included a large wooden box filled with hand tools, a crosscut saw, several axes and hatchets, and two full sets of harnesses for the next team of horses he might buy. There were also boxes of canning jars filled with beans, corn, pickles, apricots, and peaches. Three cotton-filled, blue and white striped mattresses were thrown on top of the load, leaving a small space beneath the ceiling where Ed, Duane, and I rode. We shared our small alcove with gunny sacks full of clothing--some washed, some not.

I vaguely remember Daddy hunched over a flat inner tube under the dim glow of the headlights. Whether it was that particular instant in time or one of countless other occasions when I watched him fixing a flat on the old Model A truck, I can't say for sure. I certainly don't pretend to have total recall of the events that occurred at that moment in time, but let's just say they played out something like this....



Joe Moreland in 1949. This is his story, as best he can recall.

Chapter 1: Just a Puff of Air

Ed came sailing around the back of the crippled Model A truck with both arms extended like the wingtips of a fighter plane diving for the kill. “Brrrrrooommm,” he shrieked and dipped his left arm closer to the ground as he turned in a tight circle, clipping Duane’s ear with his fingertips. “Waaaa,” Duane squealed in pain and toppled over sideways.

Grandpa’s left arm caught Duane in a gentle cradle before he hit the ground, but his right hand was less than kind when it made contact with the back of Ed’s head. “Watch where yer goin’, yuh idjit,” Grandpa snarled. More surprised than hurt, Ed let out a compulsory wail in case Grandpa had more severe damage in mind.

“Pap, you leave those boys alone,” Momma barked. “It’s bad enough putting up with this wind without having to listen to them crying.” She hurried over to Duane to assess the damage. She lifted his chin and stared intently at his face. “You’re looking a little yellow in the gills, Duane. I hope you don’t have worms.”

She turned to Ed and grabbed him by both shoulders, shaking him into an upright position. “Stand up straight and watch where you’re going,” she scolded. “If you keep bending over like that, your spine will never straighten out.”

Ed looked confused but grateful that Momma didn’t seem to hold him responsible for Duane’s pain. “I’m sorry, Momma, I’ll be more careful. I wasn’t thinking.”

“I know, Honey. It’s hard for you to concentrate with your back out of whack. When you get yourself all worked up, you just don’t think right,” she said and gave him an affectionate hug. “Now go set yourself down and rest before your back starts hurting.”

Dismissing the whole episode, she turned toward Daddy. “Do you have that tire patched yet?”

“Won’t be much longer,” Daddy puffed as he stroked the tire pump, filling the tube with air. He tipped a canvas desert canteen, splashing water over the inflated red tube and watched closely for bubbles. “Hard to find a hole when the tube is more patch than tire,” he complained. “Ahhh! There she is,” he crowed triumphantly when a string of bubbles broke the water surface. “Won’t be more than a couple minutes now.”

“Knowin’ you, I’ll have time to finish a smoke,” Grandpa cackled as he reached deep in the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a well-worn sack of Bull Durham. “How ‘bout rollin’ me one, Tookie?” he asked, thrusting the grime-covered bag of tobacco in her general direction.

“Keep that smelly garbage away from me!” Momma shrieked. “My guts are already in knots from bouncing around in the truck without having to breathe in that stink!” she yelled and fanned the air in front of her nostrils.

Grandpa sullenly plopped down beside the truck to begin the task of manufacturing a cigarette. He placed the draw strings of the tobacco sack between his lips and moistened a fingertip to aid in the task of separating the thin cigarette papers. His gnarled fingers had trouble folding the paper into a trough, but he finally managed. Holding the folded paper in one shaking hand, he worked the tobacco pouch open with his lips and free hand. When the sack was open, he tapped a small heap of tobacco flakes onto the paper and distributed it with the tip of his index finger. Using both hands, he rolled the paper into a tube between his thumbs and index fingers, trying to work it into the semblance of a cigarette. When it was finally cylindrical in shape and reasonably firm, he slathered it with saliva to seal the seam and deftly twisted both ends to finish the job. He smugly admired his handiwork, placed the cigarette between his lips, and fished deeply into his pants pocket for a wooden match. Hoisting his right leg, he scratched the match along his thigh. When the match flared, he cupped it from the wind. As he tipped his head down to light the misshapen cigarette, loose flecks of tobacco dribbled out of the end, leaving behind an empty flap of paper. When the flame touched the cigarette paper, it ignited into a bright yellow inferno that singed Grandpa’s scraggly mustache.

“Dag Nabbit,” he swore vehemently, slapping ashes off his upper lip. “Friggin’ thing blew up on me! Hope yer happy, Tookie.”

Momma turned away to conceal a satisfied smirk. “Little pitchers have big ears, Pap. Wish you wouldn’t cuss in front of the kids.” She called to Daddy, “Better git a move on. It’s almost dark, and the boys haven’t had supper. We need to get back on the road or we won’t make Emily’s before midnight.”

“I found the hole and as soon as I can get a patch on, we’ll be out of here.” Daddy already had the air out of the tube and was studiously roughing up the area around the puncture. “Pap, would you switch on the headlights so I can see what I’m doin’ here?”

Grandpa reached inside the cab of the truck and threw the switch, bathing Daddy and the tube in a dim yellow glow. Daddy smeared adhesive rubber cement over the roughened tube and peeled the backing from a tire patch. “If you have a match, touch off this glue, will you, Pap?” Daddy suggested.

Grandpa found another wooden match and flicked it with a rough thumbnail to draw forth flame. "Should have bought some of them vulcanizing patches before we left like I told you," he reproached. "We'll be lucky if that bicycle patch holds 'till we get to Umatilla."

"Couldn't afford 'em," Daddy explained. "Those things cost 2 bits apiece."

Grandpa touched the match to the glue and a blue flame flickered across the red rubber.

"Hold that match," Daddy said. He reached under his suspenders and pulled a crumpled pack of Lucky Strikes from the pocket of his denim shirt.

"Can't afford a decent tire patch, but you can buy sissy tailor-mades, I see," smirked Grandpa. "You musta been makin' pretty good money haulin' apples."

"Yeah, still would be if you hadn't spooked the horses and got me fired," Daddy said with a wry smile.

"Hogwash! You got fired 'cause you pushed the foreman in the pond, not 'cause the damn horses ran off and spilled the apples when I was just tryin' to help out," Grandpa snorted.

"Well, he shouldna called you a crazy old coot," said Daddy defensively, "even if I did agree with him. When are you going to learn that you can't smack a horse in the face with the reins? You should know by now that it just scares them."

"You and Tookie have been talkin' about movin' to Curlew since apple pickin' started so it wasn't no surprise to me that you didn't even wait for your last check before loadin' up," Grandpa said, changing the subject. "Can't for the life of me figure why you wanted to leave a place like Payette and move back into the hills. Hell, we even had electric and water at the fruit camp. It's a sure cinch we won't have running water in Curlew."

"Will you guys quit yacking and get that tire back on the truck?" Momma implored with an edge in her voice. "The sun's gone and we gotta git these boys out of the night air before they catch their death."

"Soon's I pump this thing up, we'll be on the road, Momma," Daddy replied. "See if you can get the kids settled into the back of the truck."

Ed caught Daddy's warning and decided to extend his freedom from the confines of the truck box by sliding off the side of the road and running full tilt toward a huge juniper tree about 30 yards from the truck. Of course I was hot on his heels. He slapped leather and drew his pretend six-shooter, laying down a hail of bullets over his shoulder. "Bang, Bang, Bang...yer dead, Joe."

"Missed me by a mile," I said, tripping over a big sandstone boulder that Ed had cleared with ease.

"Edward Allen, you get back here," Momma yelled. "There's snakes out there, and you're gonna git Joe bit."

Out of Momma's reach, Ed kept running toward his target and rolled under the low branches of the juniper. He was dusting himself off on the other side when I reached the tree and stooped down to follow. I was barely under the tree when my head bumped into a hornet's nest. Evidently, Ed's earlier passage had stirred the yellowjackets awake, and they were none too happy to have me banging into their hive. Before I could backpedal out from under the tree, I was stung on both ears and the back of my neck. I was crying and swatting angry yellowjackets as I headed back toward the road. With my eyes filled with tears, I didn't see the big rock that had tripped me up before. This time, I fell on top of the jagged boulder and tore skin off both of my shins. I was rocking and moaning, holding my head between my knees when Ed reached me. He helped me up and brushed away the tears. "I didn't know there was a yellowjacket's nest under there, Joe. You okay?"

"Sure," I whimpered. "We better get back to the truck or Momma will really be mad."

Daddy had the tire back on the rim when we climbed up the bank. "Douse those lights Pap, or we'll drain the battery," Daddy was saying.

Momma immediately spotted the tear streaks running down my cheeks and demanded to know what was wrong. "Joe got stung and fell down and skinned his knees," Ed explained.

"Leave the lights on for a minute, Pap. We need to get a look at this boy," Momma said, dragging me unceremoniously toward the front of the truck. "Pull down your pants, and we'll see how bad it is."

I was horrified that Momma wanted me to bare my butt on the side of the road. Cars came and went, most of them slowing to gawk at our strange looking Model A truck. I studiously averted my eyes from the passing cars and unhitched my bib overalls. Hoping that no one was looking, I slid my pants down and exposed myself to Momma's scrutiny. My face turned beet red when she knelt down, pulled out a hanky, and wet it with saliva. "Don't see any blood, just skinned up a bit," she said and scrubbed the grated skin with her damp hanky.

"Owww!!! Momma, that hurts," I cried, momentarily forgetting that half the world could see my naked butt. "I...I...I'll be okay," I stammered, quickly pulling up my overalls.

"Git in the truck," she ordered. "Bugs, you stay right where you are." Her fingers were already working on the buckle of her wide belt. Ed was starting to back away when she snagged his arm with her left hand and snaked the belt through the loops of her jeans with her right. The belt zinged through the air in an overhead arc, landing with a snap on Ed's backside. Twice, three times, four times the belt sailed through the air. Ed was hopping in a circle to

get ahead of the stinging belt, but Momma pirouetted to keep him within reach and didn't lose a stroke. When it was over, Ed rubbed his haunch and valiantly fought back tears.

Momma put her belt back on, but her sharp tongue continued to mete out punishment. "You've been cruisin' for a bruise all afternoon, mister. Now you better straighten up and fly right. Try to use your head for something besides a hat rack. Next time I call, you'd better come a runnin'. Now help Joe into the truck so we can get back on the road."

We felt the truck lurch as Daddy lowered the jack. "Okay, we're ready to go," we heard him tell Momma and Grandpa. When he stomped down on the starter, the motor ground over once and stopped. "Should have turned off the lights when I told you, Pap. The battery's dead as a doornail." He never mentioned that my self-inflicted wounds helped drain the juice out of the battery, but I knew it was my fault.

Daddy climbed out of the cab and reached under the seat for the hand crank. "Tookie, advance the spark a smidge while I give 'er a crank."

I peeked through the hole connecting the truck box with the cab and watched as Daddy leaned into the crank to roll the engine into starting position. When the slack was out, he threw all of his weight onto the crank. "Kapow!!!" the engine backfired and the crank handle spun backwards in a vicious arc, catching Daddy's wrist. "Christ all mighty!!" he bellowed and backed away, shaking his arm. "How far did you advance that spark, Momma?"

"I can't crank with a smashed hand," he said in a pained voice. "Looks like we'll have to push it."

"We can't push this loaded truck up a hill! For someone who has a eighth grade education, you don't know squat," Grandpa snorted.

"With the boys helping, we can get it to the top and then it'll be smooth sailing," Daddy said encouragingly. "Momma can steer and we'll do the grunt work. Bugs, you and Joe climb down and give us a hand," he hollered.

"She can't drive," Grandpa snickered, always looking for an angle to avoid any kind of hard work. "I better take the wheel or we'll end up in the ditch," he stated matter-of-factly and reached for the door handle.

"You know darn well I don't have the strength to push a truck, Pap," Momma snapped, but seemed to have muscle enough to wrestle the steering wheel out of his hands. "I think I can herd a truck up this little grade."

With Momma steering and Grandpa swearing with each step, Daddy, Grandpa, Ed, and I managed to shove the truck to the top of the hill. "Okay, climb aboard and we'll get this show on the road," Daddy said triumphantly. Ed and I were barely back on board when he pushed in the clutch and the truck started coasting. When we had picked up enough speed, he popped the clutch and the engine sputtered to life. Momma leaned through the hole in the back of the truck cab and tossed a blanket over all of us. "Get some sleep boys; we'll be at Aunty's house in no time."

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I remember was being lifted out of the truck and carried inside. I heard Aunty's sweet, sing-song voice as she laid me in a warm bed beneath an open window. Aunty fluffed the pillow under my head and I felt a gentle gust of air brush the hair from my eyes. Whether it was Aunty's breath as she bent to kiss me good night or a soft breeze blowing through the open window that rustled my hair, I'll never know. But to this day, I can close my eyes and recall that puff of air grazing my forehead. We never did get supper that night, but being off the hill and in bed in Aunty's house was all I needed.



Grandpa, Momma, Duane, Joe, and Edward standing beside our disabled Model A truck. We were on our way to Aunty's house in Umatilla, Oregon in 1948.