

UP STERLING CREEK WITHOUT A PADDLE

CONFESSIONS OF A
RECOVERING JOURNALIST

PAUL FATTIG

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OREGON

UP STERLING CREEK WITHOUT A PADDLE

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DEDICATION

Placing the Blame

WRITING THE DEDICATION WAS THE MOST difficult challenge in completing this book because there were so many to blame and those left standing scurried for cover. But we'll give it the old college try.

Foremost is my late father whose passion for books instilled in me a lifelong love with the printed word. Although he left the classroom after the eighth grade, Paul R. Fattig, Sr. was an avid reader who was self taught well beyond his formal education. He left an indelible imprint.

I also had many fine teachers in my formative years. Two of my favorites were Don and Eileen Orton, talented pedagogues at Kerby Elementary School who both strived—with varying degrees of success—to teach me the fundamentals of our mother tongue. Another was science teacher Bill Bryant, an easy-going fellow who made the hard sciences come alive.

Nor can I forget Bob Grant, the curmudgeonly editor of the weekly Illinois Valley News in Cave Junction who, against his better judgment, gave me a part-time job as a printer's devil while I was a high school sophomore in 1967. He whetted my appetite for journalism.

But my greatest Fourth Estate mentor was a fine fellow named Joe Cannon, an editor and publisher who hired me to edit a new weekly newspaper he was launching. Never mind that I was still a student at the

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University of Oregon. Joe was a terrific boss and adviser who gave me a chance when I sorely needed one. Nor can I forget the excellent professors at Duck U, including the inimitable Duncan McDonald and peerless Ralph Salisbury.

There are so many editors who have saved me from utter ruin over the years: Cathy Noah and Bob Hunter in Oregon; Carmen Dybdahl, Carol Murkowski and Duncan Frazier in Alaska; and Gene Bisbee in California, to name a few.

Our children—Sara, Rick, Amy, Derra and Sheena—contributed significantly by becoming fine humanoids, despite being part of a melded family. Like Lake Woebegone offspring, our grand children are all above average, of course.

Finally, without my wife, Maureen, at my side, no book would have been forthcoming. With apologies to the poet William Ernest Henley, she is the mistress of my soul.

PROLOGUE

An Awakening

APPROACHING THE BIRTH OF 2014, I AWOKE TO AN epiphany that changed my life. After more than thirty years as a newspaper journalist, it dawned on me: The hand that fed me was dying. Although I am usually buoyantly optimistic, at times to the point of being slow on the uptake, I couldn't help but notice a few liver spots developing on the ink-stained appendage. However, I happily ignored the obvious signs of old age along with frequent whispered warnings by fellow toilers in the Fourth Estate that the end of print journalism as we knew it was at hand. Deep down, even I had an inkling that papers were evolving into an electronic format that would turn them into permanent denizens of the digital universe. Newspapers were dinosaurs.

Of course, this is no revelation if you are a member of the millennial generation or just reached the point of being able to decipher the printed word. After all, raised as a cyberspace cadet, you only have a vague notion of what constitutes a newspaper. Your grandparents, those old geezers from the Baby Boom generation, could tell you about them, if you could just get the decrepit wheezers to look up from their smart phones for a moment. God, I loathe old people my age who are computer whizzes. For your edification, newspapers consisted of large sheets of paper covered with

news and featured articles, photographs and advertising. Neanderthals and their troglodyte pals found them handy to line their cave floors while conducting the messy business of painting bison and mastodons on the walls. In the 20th Century, owners of canaries found a similar use for newspapers as did folks who had a successful day at the fishing hole.

Yet I obliviously kept plugging along, trying to forget Ralph Waldo Emerson's admonition that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. I've never been precisely sure what a goblin is, let alone the hob edition. Moreover, Mr. Emerson lived long before humankind ever dipped a timid toe into the digital waters. What the heck did he know?

I prefer to believe I wasn't a Luddite. I was simply hoping print journalism would get a second wind in its long run of more than three centuries. Yet its coughing and wheezing became more pronounced each year. If you listened carefully, you could sometimes hear the raspy gasp of a death rattle in the newsroom. Still, no one jumped out the office windows. I chock that up to the fact we were on the second floor. Smacking onto the parking lot below would have only broken multiple bones, followed by a painful medical bill. Not a good scenario since our once healthy health insurance package had been gutted like a mackerel and was in intensive care. Sadly, it was not expected to recover. Greedy corporate relatives were already fighting over its last will and testament.

The more astute scribes had read the hand writing on the newsroom wall. One fellow writer was surreptitiously studying to get his realtor's license while another took a managerial job with a non-profit dedicated to improving the lives of abused children. Our crime reporter, a talented fellow who previously taught writing at Oregon State University, followed his felonious muse by snagging a job counseling habitual criminals. The published poet among us hung on by his fingernails until he could drop safely into a retirement nest festooned with iambic pentameter.

I didn't want to be the only one left to attend the wake. I needed to take the leap. Preferably not out the news room windows, having already broken several bones over the years. I was hoping for something that didn't involve a hard landing, followed by a long and painful recovery. I don't mind a few lumps, bumps and bruises. It's just that I get woozy when I see a

compound fracture with its telltale splintered bone jutting out and copious amounts of blood spurting forth, particularly when it's my blood. What I hoped to find was another adventure involving playing with words.

With those parameters in mind, my wife, Maureen, and I pored over our finances. After a long weekend which included walking barefoot on the soothing sands of the glorious Oregon coast, we decided I should take early retirement from my newspaper job and try my hand at writing books. Our kids were somewhat potty trained and had largely fledged. Our pets had completed their advanced schooling. By tightening belts and eating every other day, we could survive. OK, maybe we wouldn't be skipping meals. But we hoped dinner wouldn't involve slicing smelly cold cuts from furry creatures found dead along Oregon highways.

Despite the trepidation, I was excited about making a dramatic lifestyle change. My longtime goal has been to become a recovering journalist writing books focusing on subjects of my own choosing. I longed to wax eloquently about the people, places and things on our strange little planet, just knowing that hordes of eager readers are waiting to hang onto every amazing detail and astounding insight. Yeah, I know, all the world needs is another over-the-hill journalist writing endless prattle. You correctly suspect that, as a seasoned reporter who knows a little about a lot of things but a lot about nothing, I am a past master at prattling. Whether it is worth reading you decide. This marks the first offering. So be kind. At the outset of this endeavor, I figured writing a book would be as easy as pulling words out of the air like so many daisy petals. But apparently some persnickety readers like to see the words in a rational order which at least makes a wild stab at coherency. Go figure.

While I don't profess to recall everything I learned at university, I do remember writing professors urging writers to focus on what they know. These were professors of creative writing, not journalism instructors. There is a difference between fiction and journalism. Honestly. For my first book, I decided to write about the partially-burned log house we bought and restored along Sterling Creek in southwest Oregon. As you shall soon discover, living with Maureen is a hoot.

But I must offer a sincere apology to fans of Peter Mayle whose brilliant

A Year in Provence book inspired this tome. The Mayles restored a 200-year-old stone house in rural France while we were patching back together a wood house half that age. Unlike the grand stones of France, our humble home was built of logs and lumber. And the original builders were apparently not particular when it came to the chore. But we love the place which we fondly refer to as a cabin.

I freely admit this book lacks Mayle's remarkable writing style, incredible wit and wonderful segues into French cuisine which would leave literary buffs hungry for more of that 1989 best seller. Nor did we find two Napoleonic gold coins as they did during their restoration in Provence, albeit we uncovered a 1907 Indian head copper penny. But our pets are smarter. And the wine from the Applegate Valley vineyards isn't too shabby. Moreover, you do get nearly fifteen years in our rustic cabin that remains a work in progress. I know. It seems longer.

Before we proceed further, you need to get acquainted with the two principals inhabiting the following pages. In truth, I could correctly be described as the antagonist since I frequently make comments that cause my significant other to look to the heavens for strength. Her keel is always even, always steady. Mine wanders all over the place, particularly when I'm ranting and raving. But I like to think I keep her life interesting.

Maureen is a hair stylist who has a salon on commercial property we bought in Medford, the regional hub for Southern Oregon and far Northern California. She has owned similar hairy establishments in Montana, Idaho and California. As a testament to her talent, several of her former clients from California's Bay Area traveled to Medford for years to have her coiffeur their pigmented filaments. She even had clients with relatives in Germany who scheduled appointments with her while visiting Oregon relatives. *Danke shoen.*

No readers or their attorneys, thankfully ever followed me anywhere. At least they weren't successful in their efforts to track me down to pursue threatened legal action.

At the time of my decision to pursue my dream of writing books, I was a columnist and reporter for the *Mail Tribune* newspaper out of Medford. It had been a good job with talented coworkers. We also got free doughnuts

every other Wednesday. Hey, take it from me; those beignets—one of the few words I remember from my college French—were a big deal in newspaperdom where perks are notoriously scant. The doughnuts, coupled with an interesting and fun job whose perks included working alongside competent and congenial journalists, kept me there for more than two decades.

The *Medford Mail Tribune* lined a few cave floors over the years, becoming the fourth largest paper in Oregon. It even earned a Pulitzer Prize nearly a century ago, back in those distant decades when people actually got their news from newspapers and not on TV or the internet. That was a little while before I came along, of course.

I had written for more than a dozen papers on the West Coast, principally in Oregon but included stints in California and Alaska. While I was not a particularly gifted practitioner of my chosen profession, I managed to muddle along well enough to have had an interesting career, traveling a bit and meet a lot of fascinating folks, including one U.S. president—George W. Bush. Think what you will but he did sit in the Oval Office and pondered a bit. He also flew around the globe on Air Force One. So he fits the presidential profile. Thus, I can honestly say I had a very short conversation with the most powerful person on the planet.

Granted, it is true many political pundits on both sides of the aisle considered the forty-third U.S. president a diminutive one at best. But I found him an interesting fellow nonetheless. As I grow long of tooth, I have come to understand that none of us, save for Mr. Hitler and his evil ilk, are all bad. Or all good, for that matter. Best we can do is treat each other with respect and kindness, knowing full well we will periodically fall short. Vengeance at the hands of mortals may be frowned upon by godly beings, but I've noticed many religious zealots think they can get by with it if they bellow loud and long and get to church on time.

Strangely, my presidential encounter—I also had a short chat with the man who would be White House inhabitant No. 41 in the form of George H.W. Bush when he was a mere vice president—occurred roughly a mile as the crow flies from the rustic cabin we had just purchased. At the time, there was an old toilet sitting innocently in the cabin's back yard. I'll leave

it to you to decide what symbolism to attach to the commode vis a vis the presidential visit. We will get to that odd but true tale in due time. Be patient. As you shall see, the old cabin seems to trigger rather bizarre events and attract unusual humanoids and other odd mammals. True, it could be something in the water. Either that or the peculiar human inmates suffering cabin fever in the dwelling are magnets for the wacky and weird.

The Bush incident reflects an observation made by a U.S. Attorney I came to know while covering a trial. In his opening statement to me, he noted that I seemed to lead a Forrest Gump life. However, unlike Mr. Gump who accidentally ends up in historical events, I bump into people who have left their mark on history, he correctly concluded in his closing argument. I like to think it was a compliment but I am harassed by doubt, knowing I am sometimes as hapless as the Gumpster.

Armed with the realization that I could finally take my book-writing plunge, I took a deep breath and leapt. I quit my day job at the end of 2013 to plunge into what for me was uncharted waters. A friend who has written several books—and had them published—advised that the trick is not to be intimidated by your magnum opus: you write it one page at a time. But you treat it like a job and go to work daily, he stressed.

So I took his advice. Now, each morning before dawn, I climb upstairs to my writing loft. I'm usually carrying a hot cup of tea, although I do fire up a pot of coffee when Earl Grey fails to provide sufficient stimulation. I write for a couple of hours, then wake Maureen and make her a cup of hot mocha. We engage in a pleasant morning chat over a light breakfast of toast, muffins and bananas. No *beignets*. Our two large pooches invariably mooch a piece of toast or a bit of muffin to tide them over until I serve them a hearty breakfast.

After Maureen goes to work, I tidy up a bit. When I feel particularly frisky, I even shave and brush my teeth. But I only floss the ones I want to keep. That lame joke is one I like to tell our dentist, a bright but beefy fellow who played football at Oregon State University. He grimaces at my sophomoric humor, apparently accepting it as the price to pay for having a patient who graduated from a ducky university south of Corvallis.

Prepared for the day, I feed our mooching mutts and ten assorted cats

Maureen has collected. An assorted cat is one which hasn't been sorted out when it comes to pedigree, by the way. With the wildebeests having gorged, I then take the dogs out to our dog park to let them conduct their business and stretch their legs. They also do a thorough reconnaissance, sniffing out any nocturnal activities that may have occurred overnight. This, of course, requires watering down numerous bushes and trees. Later, after refilling their tanks, they will take me for a short walk up the valley to irrigate yet more vegetation. The dogs drag me along by their leashes as they visit attractive points of interest such as a bush where a coyote urinated the night before or to a fascinating little pile of poop left by some nocturnal creature. A large mound of fresh bear scat, particularly if it is still steaming, causes a quick retreat to the cabin, despite the protestations from my furry comrades who fear no bear. There is no bar to the door to bar bears, but I securely lock the dead bolt should the bruin come sniffing around. At that point I would take the sage advice of Ogden Nash who wrote the great line, "If called by a panther don't anther." Now there was a fellow with a way with words.

Unfortunately, my domestic duties also include house work, a job that I don't find all that inspiring. That ultimately means chasing after dust bunnies that are larger than your average house cat. The scraggly hares make the fat felines jittery. Even the dogs get a little jumpy when a rather large dust bunny hops silently up from the floor. My job is to hunt them down and kill them, something this reformed hunter doesn't particularly enjoy. I let them live as long as possible. But the dishes are generally properly washed. Rarely does Maureen, who is much more fastidious than her husband, discover a dead dust bunny in a bowl or glass; not that often, anyway. When she saw a bunny peeping out from under the couch recently, she reminded me of a line from a poet I've loved since childhood.

"As you often say, Robert Service wrote that, 'A promise made is a debt unpaid,'" she said. "And you promised to keep the house clean if you were able to write at home. Now is your chance to make good on that promise. Did I mention that we do have a perfectly good vacuum?"

"You know perfectly well he was referring to cremating Sam McGee and not about firing up the Hoover," I countered. "Besides, cremating

someone has to be much more pleasant than vacuuming. Aside from the sizzling sound and greasy odor at the outset, I'm sure it is a rather pleasant business, particularly on a barge on frozen Lake LaBarge."

Such was my appreciation for the poet that I once made a detour while driving the Alaska-Canada Highway to spend a night on the shores of Lake Laberge in the Yukon Territory. It was on that very real body of water that the fictitious cremation occurred. Service changed the name to Lake Labarge in the poem, apparently so he would have a rhyme for "marge," otherwise known as the lake's edge. It isn't really a lake but a three-mile wide section of the Yukon River. It's a beautiful spot should you ever seek a respite from the piercing scream of vacuum cleaners.

"Unlike a cremation, vacuuming is hideous from beginning to end," I said to Maureen, resuming my rant. "Deservedly so, the guy who invented the vacuum cleaner was cremated while he was still alive by a mob of angry people driven mad by the sound of vacuums. They figured it was a light punishment for the madman who created the vile machine that makes such an odious racket."

When I launch into a flight of fancy in an attempt to change the subject, I like to wander into a forest of non sequiturs. Segues—and Mr. Mayle—be damned. If it works as intended, I find it a good way to lead the victim off the beaten path. I prefer to believe that the whimsical wanderings keep Maureen on her toes while allowing me to take my pent-up restless imagination for a short walk. On a leash, of course. Never mind it has occurred to me that I may be wrong on both counts.

No matter. Maureen has grown wise to my methods. She invariably stays on point.

"You made a solemn promise," she reiterated. "Perhaps you might think about cremating some of these dust bunnies before they take over. They're reproducing faster than you can get rid of them."

She is right about my housekeeping responsibilities, of course. I do rev up the shrill scream machine when gangs of dust bunnies roam the cabin, spoiling for a fight. Unfortunately, just like their live counterparts, the dusty hair balls are masters of reproduction. Yes, it may very well be a family values thing but I refuse to hop into the politics of rabbits.

When I finish all my chores, including the detestable one that really sucks, I retreat up stairs to resume writing. Maureen refers to my writing space as the “man cave.” But it is more aptly the lair of the beasts. I usually wade through a furry crowd of snoozing cats and dogs in able to reach my desk. Once there, I am in my element. The sound of snoring dogs and purring cats adds a beastly atmosphere that prompts a periodic grunt of approval from this caveman.

As a rehabilitating journalist, I have weaned myself from incessantly reading about the news or listening to it on the radio. We don’t watch television so that isn’t a problem. I’m now at the place where I concur with the old song by Simon and Garfunkel, the one including the line, “I get all the news I need from the weather report.” Maureen is pleased but some old newsies I know are gob smacked at my journalistic heresy of wandering off the Fourth Estate into sublime pastures of cheat grass along Sterling Creek.

I now subscribe to “slow journalism,” a term I first saw penned by Paul Salopek, a very talented journalist. He used the phrase to describe his anticipated seven-year Out of Eden walk to retrace the migratory steps of our Stone Age ancestors, starting in the birthplace of humankind in Africa all the way to the tip of South America. As I write this, he is walking through the Middle East. It is a journalistic excursion well worth following.

With that, I must offer a few words of caution about this tome. Some of us writers are like people who fish: our stories tend to grow over the years. Consider the six-pound German brown trout I caught in the Deschutes River a dozen years ago in central Oregon. That already hefty trout has grown nearly ten pounds, having gained a pound or so with each telling of the story. If I live to be 100, the trout will exceed twenty pounds, attaining lunker status.

But I’ll endeavor to keep this slippery fish within legal literary limits, whatever that may be.

I shall also try to rein in tangents which have been known to lure me off the path, leaving the reader bewildered and lost deep in an untrammelled wilderness of words. As you have dubiously discovered, we’ve already wandered into the world of dust bunnies, Yukon-style crematoria, and

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canine “marking” habits. Future digressions, poor things, will be tethered so they can’t ramble too far afield and unable to find their way back home.

But I digress. You are wondering why on earth Maureen and I ever bought an old cabin. That strange tale skulks in chapter one, waiting to pounce on those brave readers who have survived thus far.

ONE

Cabin Fever

FOR NORMAL PEOPLE LOOKING FOR THAT DREAM HOME, the toilet squatting in what passed for a yard would have prompted a hasty retreat back to the civilized world.

Indeed, anyone with even a tentative grip on real estate reality would jump back in the car, lock the doors and roar back down the long driveway in a cloud of dust. The expletives they were likely to yell out the side windows would have been lost in the sound of flying gravel, followed by smoking, squealing tires upon reaching the pavement. Later, in telling the tale, they would guffaw at the hapless saps ending up with the disaster waiting to befall them.

However, Maureen and I were not your average saps in search of new digs in our native southern Oregon in the fall of 2001. Very peculiar but largely mentally sound, our friends would tell you. They are extremely charitable, considering how high we score on the wackiness scale.

“We may want to give some thought about moving that toilet,” I observed as we surveyed the yard debris. “On the other hand, we could just leave it there and wave at passersby while doing our business. Wouldn’t want them to think we were antisocial.”

“Sometimes I wonder about your sense of decorum, sweetie,” Maureen countered. “I realize you came from rural Oregon but you need to remember you now live in civilized society. Of course we don’t have to move it. We’ll just build a little frame and put curtains around it. Something pea green with a flowery design would be nice.”

With that, we both started giggling and snorting. They are right, our friends. We plead guilty of being peculiar, maybe even a tad eccentric. I’ll leave it to you the jury to decide which one of us is more reality challenged.

There is no denying we were long past slap happy when it came to looking at potential new homes. For more than two years, we had been property hunting in search of a place closer to our jobs. We wanted acreage in the country but relatively close to town. Not too far, not too close. Anything outside the city limits but within twenty minutes of town was in our Goldilocks zone.

We were also seeking a fixer upper, an old place chock full of history. As a result, we had waded through some real down-in-the-dumps dumps that would have scared the bejabbers out of a veteran EPA field worker. So a few imperfections didn’t faze us at that point. What’s more, we figured the blemishes came with the territory, given our financial limitations. Anything short of discovering mummified remains in a closet would be taken in stride.

The place we had come to check out during our extended lunch break was about a half dozen miles south of the historic mining boom town of Jacksonville in Jackson County. The property itself included a nearly century old largely log cabin with two bedrooms and two baths nestled in a little valley on nearly forty-five acres along Sterling Creek. It was ripe with both potential and pitfalls. There was a substantial forest of evergreens, including cedar, pine and fir. It was also thick with deciduous trees like laurel, oak and maple. The southern exposure on the north side of the little valley also had a stand of giant manzanita more than a foot in diameter at the base. It was the picturesque kind of place you would envision your forefathers and foremothers settling in after arriving from the old country, wherever the heck that was.

But the cabin had been gutted by fire more than a decade earlier. It was

largely a skeletal shell, protected from the elements by a barn-red metal roof. It seemed to be waiting for the right people to stumble upon it.

The immediate area was also steeped in history which was a big draw for us. The property was little more than a gold nugget's throw from the long defunct mining boom town of Sterlingville, one of many tiny towns that mushroomed up in the headlong scramble for precious metal in the West. Like a forest fungi which ultimately fades back in the earth from whence it came, Sterlingville died away a century ago.

Without getting too deep into the weeds, you need to get to know the two principal personalities you will be living with in the coming pages. Not to worry. We are mostly user friendly. We even have lucid moments at times.

You will soon realize that I can be a starry-eyed Don Quixote; Maureen is the Sancho Panza with earthy wit, although she has more common sense than the windmill challenger's sidekick. However, unlike Cervante's Sancho, she is neither anyone's servant nor a bit of a slow poke whose ideas ride in on a plodding donkey. Her bursts of excitation and energy upon having hatched a new idea would have dazzled Tesla.

I am loathe to admit it but she is also the brainier one in the outfit. She invariably comes up with sound ideas to solve whatever dilemma we encounter. While I am prone to endless mulling, often leading to far-flung forays into God knows what, she zeros in on the problem. Her brain seldom switches off. The prudent thing to do is to sit back and wait, something I am still working on since I am the impatient type. Yet her ideas invariably prove educational, although they can be a tad bit scary or downright hilarious. Sometimes both. I find it best to keep one eye open when awake.

Like all of us, she is not perfect, although it took me a few years to discover her one flaw. She has yet to meet an animal she did not want to turn into a pet, a genetic disorder inherited from her father. Thus we have always lived with a hairy harem that includes a couple of dogs and numerous cats. Given the pets, our new home and land had to be able to accommodate them. Did I mention that pet hair is a condiment in our house? The cool thing about it is you rarely have to floss. But it is no fun coughing up a hair ball.

Don't get me wrong. I love our furry brothers and sisters. But I can get restless and cranky when my feeding and watering comes after all the beasts have been made comfy. Comes from a survivalist mentality acquired during childhood, I suppose. Truth be told, I can be a little slow when it comes to doing the right thing. Although I don't have cloven hooves, I sometimes need to be poked and prodded to follow Maureen's kindly footsteps. I like to think it doesn't take as much cajoling as it once did for me to be a halfway decent humanoid.

But I was ready to fight when a journalistic friend described me as uxorious. While I was willing to make allowances for his having been born in England, he had obviously stepped over the line.

"In my native Josephine County, you had better be ready to brawl when you throw a word like that at someone," I told him. "I've been accused of a lot of things in my life but I believe I have never been called something that foul sounding. Would you like to apologize before things turn ugly?"

"Sorry," he replied. "I forgot you are from Kerby. Being uxorious simply means you dote on your wife, albeit a bit excessively."

I informed him that people from Kerby are decent folk, not the type who would wildly launch words like "uxorious" and "albeit" in one sentence, let alone utter such words in a lifetime. But I accepted his apology, what with English being a second language for the English.

Besides, I do adore my wife. Not only is she easy on the eyes, but she is bright, likable and has an infectious laugh. To put it in the vernacular spoken when the cabin was young, she's the bee's knees, although I'm not precisely sure what a bee's knee looks like. Me, I am not something an optometrist would recommend staring at for too long a period. I'm also something of a bookworm and taciturn at times to the point of being misanthropic. When I am asked to speak at a public gathering, my knees tend to buckle. However, thanks to having made a public ass of myself enough times and lived to tell about it, I'm starting to realize public elocution and public executions are not synonymous. At least the incontinence problems are drying up.

As noted, we were both born with webs between our toes, figuratively speaking, although the skin between my big toes and the fellow next in

line looks a little froggish. We have a deep affection for the webfoot state which has been celebrating its birthday every Valentine's Day since 1859. Arizona was also officially born on Valentine's Day. But Oregon is half a century older, doubtlessly making its biped beavers wiser than the two-footed desert rats. Not to be snooty, of course.

"We're like the salmon we came home to die," Maureen loves to tell people when they ask why we left California to return to rustic southern Oregon. The quip is usually met with nervous laughter, followed by discreet inquiries about our physical and mental health. "Oh, we're fine," she'll reply with a sweet smile. "We are just spawned out like a couple of soreback salmon."

At that point, folks unfamiliar with the life cycle of those Pacific Northwest waterborne inhabitants appear as though they are about to hurl. They look around for a place to quickly wash the hand that just shook Maureen's little but powerful pinky. I hastily inform them that we really don't have a communicable disease, at least none whose symptoms include disgusting sores on our backs. I explain soreback refers to salmon that are starting to die naturally after having completed their reproduction cycle. Their skin loses its healthy sheen, becomes mottled and starts sloughing off here and there, making them resemble river-dwelling zombies. They die, their discarded flesh providing protein for their offspring and for hungry bears as part of the circle of life.

Incidentally, I do have a periodic itchy spot between my shoulder blades. "Nothing to worry about," my wife concluded after a cursory inspection, "probably just the heartbreak of psoriasis. Either that or the onset of leprosy. Don't hug me for the next six months."

I should mention that, in addition to being as cute as a bug's ear, she is also the funny one.

We hail from blue-collar families in the relatively poor region of this rural state. But it would be wrong to categorize us as dirt poor: our families didn't own much dirt to speak of. Even in Kerby, where being well off often meant the head of the household only sought unemployment relief during the winter months, my family was down and out. Our mom was a jobless widow with five young children and a mutt named Willy living in

a shack largely held together by termites. The insects were doubtlessly considered by their woodworm relatives to be lowbred louts living in a dismal dwelling not fit for habitation by high-toned termites. While roadkill was never on our scant menu, we may have looked wistfully at a road side meal a time or two. Still, we never knowingly ate termites. That was mostly out of respect for their job of holding the house together. We also suspected termite stew lacked a satisfying piquant.

Maureen likes to say she is from the poor side of the tracks in the relative metropolis of Grants Pass. Yet she was reared in a two-parent working household with a likable but sassy sister and a largely purebred pooch named Dusty. I figured she was high class. Still do, after all these years.

While we ought not to get too deep into the weeds, you need to at least part the poison oak and blackberries to gain further insight into our unorthodox journey through life. We met when we were 16, went together in high school, then one of us got a wild hair and joined the Marine Corps in 1969.

I can tell you I served with Sgt. Richard Eubank in the 4th Marine Division, that I have been to Vietnam, spent most of 1971 in the Veterans Hospital in Portland and walk with a pronounced limp. Members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars will recognize the still gungho Richard, now a retired master sergeant, as the VFW's 2010-11 national commander. As I write this, he is now serving as the commander of the state VFW chapter in Oregon, having retired to the Beaver state from his native California.

About now you have concluded that I was wounded in Vietnam but your conclusion would have jumped far beyond the facts. My friendship with Richard can be chalked up to yet another Forrest Gump episode in my life. Like many in the military and unlike Richard, the only battles I ever experienced in the military were fighting hangovers. I lost every time, incidentally. I was stateside throughout my tour. Richard arrived at the division headquarters at Camp Pendleton in California where I was stationed after he completed a tour in Vietnam. I broke my neck in a car wreck—I bought the 1964 Volkswagen I was driving at the time from Richard—while foolishly celebrating with buddies shortly after completing my hitch. Rendered a quadriplegic, I learned how to walk again in the VA

hospital, albeit I never regained full dexterity on my right side, hence a hitch in my gait. I went to Vietnam as a journalist years after I left the Corps. As a marine, I did absolutely nothing more than occasionally play war games with reservists who lacked any enthusiasm for what they clearly felt were pointless endeavors. They may have been on to something.

I bring this up because too many wrongfully conclude that anyone who served in uniform is a hero. That myth does a disservice to those who were in combat, particularly those who gave either a limb or their all. For instance, of my three brothers who all served in Vietnam while in the Army, only my twin was in combat. Even in the Corps, many of the fellows I served with had never been in the heat of battle. Yet we were all ready and willing. Of course, there was also a few what we called non hackers, also known by coarser language as shit birds. But they were only a few foul feathers in an otherwise fine flock.

Suffice it to say my joining the military resulted in both Maureen and I going our separate ways, eventually getting married to folks with whom we had little in common other than walking upright and having opposing thumbs. This is not meant as a pejorative to the others involved, although I'm not convinced one individual had a fully developed brain stem. No names, given our litigious society.

The bottom line is we now know we should have stayed together from the outset, cutting out the middle men and women. It took two decades for us to reunite, becoming a blended allAmerican family with five kids bound together by love and laughter with intermittent debates and disagreements. We found that duct tape helps. Baling wire is also an excellent fall back in the event the tape doesn't stick. One doesn't want a family member wriggling loose and terrorizing society. Actually, Maureen and I have Lake Woebegone children: they are all above average. The girls are frighteningly strong. But there is nary a felon in the bunch.

Let us get back to what led us to the yard toilet which, by the way, was not hooked up to any plumbing. It was just sitting there, no doubt pondering the state of the world. Or it could be it was waiting for some kind of movement, real estate wise.

Our decision to move from a house we owned in the little hamlet of

Williams in southeastern Josephine County was driven by our need to live closer to our jobs in Jackson County. But it was more than a simple desire to reduce mileage. We wanted land where we had more elbow room, a place to put down permanent roots from which our activities and discoveries would become fond memories. Our offspring had all fledged and were doing well.

Nor had we just fallen off the potato truck when it came to buying property. We had bought and sold homes as new jobs required over the years. We knew what we wanted. But we had yet to find our fantasy property, the place where we would live out the remainder of our years. This would be our last stand.

The land we sought was already forming an image in our minds: it would be a restorable cottage or cabin in a little valley a few miles from the nearest town. Ideally, the town would be a historic hamlet, a quaint little place with friendly folks who didn't drool incessantly, cool old buildings filled with history and decent restaurants that didn't serve mystery meals. Cheerful tourists with fat wallets would stroll along the streets, marveling at the beauty of the place and the intelligence of its sophisticated inhabitants.

When those tourists took a short drive into the nearby countryside, they would see our impressive little country home nestled on land that would take their breath away. There would be big trees with open fields here and there where deer were browsing, looking up periodically to pause and chew their cud while evaluating the gawkers. On a spring day, you would see a fawn gamboling about on a carpet of multicolored wild flowers. Come winter, a beautiful blanket of snow would coat the land. A wisp of smoke would drift up out of the chimney, indicating a cheerful fire was crackling away in the wood stove. There would be tracks left by forest creatures we knew were there but seldom seen. Sasquatch? Sure, he would be welcome, providing he behaved himself. He would not be allowed to bellow late at night, couldn't eat us or our pets and had to bury his scat. Deep.

Regardless of the nature of the furry forest dwellers, acreage was paramount. We didn't want neighbors breathing down our necks, particularly if they had a penchant for garlic. More to the point, we wanted to be able to take our dogs or an occasional cat on short hikes, stopping to sniff the wild

roses along the way. We also wanted to raise a vegetable garden, taking advantage of Maureen's green thumbs. Our table would be filled with fresh bounty from the garden. There would be a hammock strung between two shade trees where I could comfortably watch Maureen toil in the soil. Life would be good.

This would be our final stopping place. With both of us half a century old, we wanted a home to which we would be forever wed. Yessiree Bob, it was to be the place we would love and cherish until death do us part.

Given our limited budget, it stood to reason the house would not be luxurious. Indeed, it would most certainly be a fixer upper. However, since we have basic carpentry skills and all of our digits, despite a couple of close encounters with a table saw, we figured we were up to most challenges. But we prefer our toilets inside.

Still, we weren't quite prepared for some of the hovels we encountered during our long hunt for the land of our day dreams. Some were nightmares that would have scared the daylights out of Stephen King.

Take the chicken coop that the featherbrained owner who, with a straight face, tried to pass off as a house. A work in progress, he called it. Please. Any chicken with a beak's worth of common sense would have squawked at the mere thought of having to spend the night there. There were rafters with feathers still clinging to them, apparently glued on by what comes out the south end of a northbound hen. A retirement nest it was not.

Chicken had been on the menu in another fixer upper we checked out. The inhabitants had left the remnants of the foul fowl dinner with all the trimmings on the table, disappearing like the crew and passengers on the *Mary Celeste*. The mashed potatoes, still in the bowl, had an interesting yellowish tan which an archaeologist would have called a rind. The once green salad had long turned brown. The skin on one chicken leg looked like it could have belonged to King Tut some 3,000 years dead. You wouldn't have had to be a cannibal to have preferred a pharaoh leg over the shriveled chicken appendage. Maybe the thigh of a mummified Egyptian king tastes like chicken jerky.

Unused napkins had been carefully placed next to the plates. Glasses were half full or half empty, depending on your perspective. The surface

of what appeared to have been a glass of milk was coagulated. I'm only surmising it was liquid from a bovine, mind you. We didn't sample to verify its contents.

Had they received a call in mid-meal informing them that a loved one had died? Did they suddenly decide to flee creditors? Or was there a murder most foul, triggered by one too many debates over real estate? Whatever the story we weren't buying it, the house, that is.

Then there was the rustic A-frame home in which I climbed to the top loft where I was told I would have a great view of the nearby forest. The view was terrific but it was hard to appreciate it, what with the terrifying prospect of having to climb back down the rickety ladder which rose nearly thirty feet above a concrete floor. It was reminiscent of a boarding ladder used to climb up the side of an English battleship in centuries past, back when losing a sailor or two over the side was no big deal.

Maureen will tell you she had to pry my hands off the top railing while trying to talk me down from the precarious perch. That's a slight exaggeration, of course. I wasn't really panicking. My hands were simply locked up by a little arthritis. But it is true I get a touch of vertigo every time I look down at my imminent death caused by falling from great heights. In any case, I couldn't hear her words of encouragement, what with all the whimpering and whining coming from the top rung.

You get the gist. We had seen it all. Nothing would shock us, certainly not a mere toilet perched innocently in the yard. For us, it was nothing more than a curiosity, a trifle. Nope, we would not quibble over a decorative toilet.

We had employed the services of a realtor friend who we shall call Pat since she answers to that moniker. Having been selling real estate in the area for some twenty years, she knew the lay of the land. She is also an excellent representative of the interesting people who come to the region. Born in Canada, she is a world traveler with a degree in English from the University of Colorado. Her partner in life is a smart fellow named Bud who, like yours truly, was born and reared in rural southern Oregon. He is one of those rare guys who can do a lot of different things well when it comes to hands-on work. They came from different backgrounds yet are attracted to each other by the things they have in common, including reaching out to help others.

For more than a year, Pat had been patiently taking us to rustic homes that were on the market. But nothing caught our fancy.

“We’ll just keep looking at anything with land on it until we find the one,” Maureen reiterated for the umpteenth time after we left one place whose land did not measure up to our expectations.

“Most of which should be above water,” I added helpfully.

They wisely ignored my oft-repeated attempt at real estate humor.

“There is this one place out past Jacksonville you might be interested in,” Pat said. “I haven’t seen it but it does have 44 acres with trees on it. It sounds like the old house could use a lot of work. Apparently there was a fire a couple of years ago. Nobody lives out there now. I haven’t seen the property but it may be worth a look.”

We agreed such a place offered possibilities, albeit the \$145,000 asking price was a little higher than what we wanted to pay. It doesn’t sound like much now but this was just before land prices ballooned up, mind you. However, our nest egg did not come from the golden goose. Our egg was small, fractured and oozing a bit of the yoke. If the property included land that wasn’t completely submerged, we wanted to take a look.

We took a long lunch break one day in early October of 2001 and met Pat at the property which is off a winding but picturesque county highway called Sterling Creek Road. We had driven through the area several times in the recent past in search of land. We were already fans of the beautiful Little Applegate River watershed.

“Hey, this is that place we really liked!” I told Maureen as we turned into the driveway. “Remember, we drove by it last spring and we both agreed we wanted something like this. Look at that setting.”

Nestled cozily in a little valley, the cabin with its red metal alpine roof stood about 300 feet west of the road. Some old-growth fruit trees heavy with apples and pears could be seen in a field across from the dwelling. Orchard grass grew thick and deep. Beyond the cabin was a forest with big trees on the north slope and the hoped for open spaces on the south side where deer would graze.

From the road, it looked like a place where grand parents would make their last stand. You could almost smell the fresh coffee brewing in the

kitchen and grandma's hot apple pie cooling on the wood stove. There would be grandpa with a twinkle in his eyes as he lit up his old smelly pipe before spinning a yarn. OK, tobacco smoke makes me gag but I am known for sometimes telling tales. And Maureen does bake an apple pie to die for. In any case, this could be it, the land where we would build our future.

"You're right it's the place I said would be perfect for our grand kids to visit," she said. "But I don't remember seeing a 'For Sale' sign. It also looked like someone was living here. There are a couple of cars up by the house."

Pat explained it had been on the market for six months, and there had apparently been no offers. The owner was motivated to sell, she added.

That's when we began to notice a few blemishes. The wooden gate at the end of the driveway looked like it was suffering from a major hangover. A sailor coming in after a wild weekend of imbibing wouldn't have listed as badly as the gate. Sagging in the middle, the gate resembled an old swayback horse. One hinge had only one nail keeping it attached to the post. A strong breeze could bring about its demise. We also became aware of the weeds three feet tall in the center of the driveway. No tires had rolled across the driveway in recent months. Given the fact it had been a dry fall with fire danger still lingering, we parked our vehicles at the end of the long driveway and began walking up the slight incline to the cabin.

I picked my way carefully through the weeds. It was still warm and dry so there could be a rattlesnake underfoot, impatient and cranky from being underfed and underwatered. Buzzworms give me the willies. Fortunately, they were not in the biting mood that day. Or perhaps they were taking a midday nap, snoozing while the meaty calves strode past.

Pat was right about the cars. What we had assumed were the owner's cars parked by the cabin were deader than Henry Ford. But we could blame Henry for only the Ford Mercury and the Ford van. There was also an old Chevrolet pickup truck with a camper attached. Every vehicle had broken windows and flat tires. Later we would discover two other discarded cars up the valley.

After commenting on the beauty of the area while taking note of the debris field outside the cabin, we walked up on the attached deck whose redwood boards were gray with age. Pat stepped halfway inside the

doorway of the cabin whose windows had been broken. Whether they were shattered from the fire or vandalism we knew not.

“Oh, my God!” she exclaimed. “It’s really gross in there. I can’t show this place to you.”

Or words to that effect. She had already turned heel, walking out the door. Maureen and I peeked through the doorway. Pat had been diplomatic: to call it gross was like saying Hurricane Katrina dinged up New Orleans a little. The interior had been blackened by the fire. Scorched sheetrock hung from the open ceiling. Where it was wasn’t covered by burned rubbish and ashes, the slate green concrete floor was stained by all manner of objects that had melted onto it. Log rafters overhead were charred. No one had bothered to clean up after the fire.

“Well, since we are here, we might as well see everything,” Maureen said as she waded farther into the rubbish. “It does look kind of interesting. It has possibilities.”

“Should have brought a pith helmet,” I muttered as we picked our way through the clutter.

Actually, the living room floor wasn’t a complete debris field. A small area in the center of the living room floor had been partially cleared. Someone, probably local urchins, had sprayed a pentagram on the floor with a can of red spray paint. Doubtlessly, they were trying to conjure beelzebub or some specter from beyond the veil. All they did was add another stain to the floor, one we would have a devil of a time removing. Several of the slower vandals had even signed their names. Does Jack still love Sandra or was it just a passing juvenile fancy?

Beyond it sat a wood stove, a huge one that would have devoured short logs as the homeowner tried to keep the drafty cabin warm on a cold winter’s night. Just behind it was a vertical wooden ladder attached to the wall and used to access the loft above the kitchen. You could see blue sky where the fire had eaten through the loft’s west wall.

Stepping into what had been the kitchen, we could see where an electric cooking stove and refrigerator once stood. Both had left telltale footprints on the fire-stained floor. Whatever cupboards there had been were gone, razed by the flames. The kitchen had been thoroughly cooked.

The ravenous fire had also exposed the interior of the log walls built by

someone who obviously did not have a Lincoln Logs set as a kid to perfect his craftsmanship. The old cabin had been erected with vertical fir logs, each one roughly a foot in diameter. Conceivably, they were logged from the property when the cabin was built. The exposed logs gave the old place a look of a rustic fort from the days when Oregon was still a territory.

An old codger who was a sapling when log cabins were still the mainstay told me that vertical log walls enabled settlers to replace a wall fairly easily in the event of a fire. But he may have been full of happy horse hockey. Either that or just having fun with a youngster too thick to know the difference.

The small bedroom off the kitchen had also borne the brunt of the fire. Even the upright logs were charred. Yet the master bedroom had escaped intact, albeit the walls and ceiling were smoke stained. A small woodstove stood in one corner of that bedroom. The master bedroom had originally been another cabin which was connected to the main cabin by a short hallway. It had a fir floor which seemed sound. The two bathrooms both had toilets in place, leaving us to wonder about the purpose of the orphan toilet out in the yard. We paused for a moment at the burned doorway where the back door once stood, and studied the porcelain throne.

It wasn't attached to anything. It was just there, a conversation piece. Perhaps it was used for contemplating life. It was the large kind popular back in the mid 1900s before dainty low-flow commodes were fashionable. This water closet could have been employed by those gargantuan people you read about who get caught in a bathroom and have to be hoisted out by a crane.

Yet the toilet with its smoke stains I preferred to assume they were smoke stains didn't stand out all that much in the debris field that included everything from charred timbers to fire-ravaged household appliances, even the kitchen sink. Think firebombed Dresden, World War II.

Towering above the toilet was an old-fashioned hot water tank decorated with what was undeniably an immense rust stain, one which resembled South America all the way down to Terra del Fuego. But the southern tip had a bit of a curly cue. It brought back happy memories of the crude map I had drawn in Kerby Elementary School. I had given the southern tip of

the continent a bit of a hook with Patagonia pointing north toward Florida. I thought it was a nice whimsical touch but the teacher was not impressed with my geographically challenged rendition of the New World. Still, I received a C for the creative effort, reflecting the fact the kind pedagogue saw me as a charity case with a wild imagination. I was pleased, given the grade gave my GPA a much needed boost.

Surrounding the hot water tank were various fascinating items, chief among them another old wood stove which likely first began heating the old place when Model A's bounced along what was then an old dirt road out front.

Rising from the ground were several rusting water pipes, writhing in frozen agony over the disastrous fire. Two of the pipes reached about 12 feet in the air, indicating that another old structure that was next to the cabin had been leveled by the fire. That structure apparently had a second story.

With the odd toilet, the pipes jutting up, the old wood stove and the weird hodge podge of charred remains of other household items, it would have prompted normal home buyers to give an amazingly accurate rendition of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, complete with sound effects. That would, of course, be the famous painting of a poor fellow frozen in a scream, his contorted face filled with agonizing anxiety and deep despair. Munch was certainly an impressionist who made a lasting impression.

But, as noted earlier, Maureen and I are a little shy of normal. Nor are we in a hurry to get there. Moreover, we are made of stern stuff. Despite the fire-gutted interior, the junk in the yard and the dead vehicles, we agreed the old place had a certain charm. But so did our jobs. We headed back to work.

That evening as we were driving home together, Maureen nonchalantly asked how I liked the Sterling Creek property.

"I like the land really well that little valley has a wonderful feeling about it," I replied. "I even like the old cabin. But it would take a lot of work. It would have to be gutted, of course. And we would have to haul away a lot of crap."

Maureen was quiet for a moment as I drove along. I knew something was brewing. But I was patient for once and let her thoughts percolate.

“I like it, too,” she said. “I know we only saw it for about a half hour but you know that old saying that you need to strike while the iron is hot.”

“Perhaps we need to strike,” I said, my eyes on the road ahead as I negotiated a turn.

“We struck,” she said. “Pat suggested we offer way under what the owners wanted. Since there have been no offers she thought the owners might be motivated to drop their price and counter our bid.”

“And?” I asked.

“We offered them \$116,000,” she said.

“So what was their counter offer?” I pressed.

“They didn’t counter,” she said. “They . . .”

“Rats!” I interrupted. “The more I think about it, the more I like that place. It has tons of potential. I loved that forest and the little valley. The cabin has a nice Alpine look. And the deck was kind of cool, even if it was placed over the septic tank. Maybe we should offer a little more. You know, grease the skids a bit.”

At that point, Maureen broke into that Cheshire cat grin she always gets when she is about to let a writhing feline out of the bag.

“They didn’t counter because they accepted our offer,” she said. “We are now the proud owners of 45 acres on Sterling Creek, buddy boy.”

I was silent for a moment, stunned by the news. I felt like the car-chasing dog who, upon finally catching a mechanical prey, is perplexed about what to do next, other than watering down one tire while giving it a think.

“Well, we really ought to remove that toilet,” I finally said. “It is the epitome of butt ugly.”

She groaned at the sophomoric play on words but concurred with the conclusion.

“Yes, the toilet needs to go,” she agreed.

For a dream home, it was a very inauspicious beginning.