

Part One

Light Side of the Mountain

Deputies, Locals and Locos

Rattlesnake Hunting

Moving to the mountains made me nervous. The cabin had been rented sight unseen. At least it was sight unseen by me. My wife Patti and her girlfriend Robin drove up the mountain to Camp Williams, responding to an ad in the San Gabriel Valley Tribune. It was a moment of realization for me. I realized it is more advantageous to send two beautiful women to negotiate cabins, car sales and takeout orders. Before they arrived at Camp Williams another couple, interested in the cabin, had already been there. When my wife had completed her inspection, she called me from the payphone to give me the low down.

“It’s really small, but pleasant.” This is where I, as an author, resisted the urge to make an inappropriate joke. Size actually did matter since we were moving from a four bedroom, two bath ranch house on an acre of land in West Covina. (For those of you unfamiliar with Southern California, there is no town known as East Covina, just a simple Covina. I can only assume that the early settlers of West Covina emigrated from West Virginia.) When my wife called regarding the cabin and environs, only one thing she said to me was the deciding factor on where our future abode should be, “There was another couple here, and they are interested in the cabin, but we have first choice.” I’m sure there is a psychological name for my response aside from “Joe’s Syndrome”. I told Patti that if other people want the cabin then to go ahead and tell them we will take it. What I didn’t know at the time was that the young, single, rugged maintenance man of the campground had also spoken on behalf of us getting the cabin. Well, not really *us* getting the cabin. Dale, the rugged maintenance man, had told Dave, the affable manager, that if he didn’t rent the cabin to those two beautiful women, he would resign.

My adjustment from city slicker to mountain man was not an overnight transformation. Nor did it occur naturally for me. For one thing, I was neither rugged enough to be mountain nor city enough to be slick. I was however studied in acting so I could act the part of a mountain man during my evolution. Patti and I first met while we both attended the Pacific Conservatory for the Performing Arts.

After his initial disappointment of finding out I was not a single blonde woman, Dale, the rugged maintenance man, became pivotal in my transition from probationary mountain guy to mountain man first class. The first thing I had to do was learn the lingo. There was also an odd mountain man accent I was able to fine-tune over the years. It’s difficult to explain in writing, but not trying to explain something kind of defeats the purpose of writing a book. The enunciation is not what you might have heard in movies where the mountain man has a certain tender strength to his voice. Neither did it have the quality you might expect to hear with hard

won wisdom being passed from journeyman to novice. It was more the sound of a drunken Southern twang while constantly yawning with the hope of not having to say too many words. I also had to learn the phrase, “Fair to middling”.

The first and most important indoctrination into mountain life, and a test I failed, was rattlesnake hunting. Before my residency as a cabin dweller had reached the one week mark, I was invited on my first rattlesnake hunt. I’ve never been much of a joiner and when this idea was pitched to me, and I had given it a lot of thought, I sort of blurted out, “Well that’s a dumb idea.” As you can imagine, my revelation was not met with an offer to debate the pros and cons of such an adventure. Rather I was derided as being fearful, not very manly and even my attraction to the opposite sex was brought into question. I thought that was a queer idea to bring up. Perhaps there is an historical heritage of gay men turning their backs on rattlesnake hunting. No matter the reason, denying a rattlesnake hunt was quite a serious faux pas in the mountains. It is nearly as bad as using the term faux pas in mountain conversation.

I’m not sure why rattlesnake hunting was a popular, albeit misguided, pastime of many a mountain man. Perhaps it had to do with the absence of a bowling alley. Or the fact there was not a lot to learn about rattlesnake hunting. Drink beer and try not getting bit by said snake were pretty much the only rules I was ever aware of.

Deputy Dean and the Chase Across the River

I worked in the general store at Camp Williams. It was also a café, a bar and a hub of entertainment, news and medical advice for the folks who lived up there. One unique feature of the café was the ivy that grew inside, along the wall, and up onto the ceiling. I say unique because it grew in from the outside. I don’t think we had any of those pesky rules about bug like critters making their home where food is served. Or perhaps there were rules, but we took them only as suggestions. Another distinctive characteristic of the café was the odd assortment of money attached to the ceiling. Over the years people would tape or glue coins or dollar bills to the ceiling and sign their names and put a date next to the funds. No one could ever tell me how exactly the tradition began, although I’m sure it had something to do with beer. Sadly, on a recent visit to the camp, I learned the coins and ivy are gone and there is now a fresh coat of paint on what used to be a lacquered natural wood ceiling.

Along with being a hangout for the locals, it was also a common destination for the flatlanders and the various law enforcement folks, be they sheriff’s deputies from the San Dimas station, the U.S. Forest Rangers or the Fish and Game Officers. It was definitely not a place to attempt a robbery. Not just because of the common presence of the constabularies, but more because nearly all of the folks who lived up there were armed. Also there were only three ways out of the mountains, four if you count helicopter, and all routes took some time when making your way back down to the flatlands. This made it extremely difficult to elude law enforcement.

Like all small communities, the mountain area I lived in had its share of bad apples. And try as they might, the deputies could not prevent all crime. And so it was that one afternoon at Follows Camp, which was similar to Camp Williams and about a mile west of us, there had been

a break in at one of the cabins. News like that moved fast in the village-like area we lived in. Hans would yodel the news to Sven, who in turn would relay it to the lonely goatherd who would tell it to the girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes. Soon people were congregating at the store waiting for any developing news. And you could count me into that group. I'm very nosey.

When the deputy's patrol vehicle pulled into the parking lot of the café at Camp Williams, with its lights and siren going, I went to get the scoop from Deputy Dean. Deputy Dean was a pretty intimidating form of a man, standing at the overlook with binoculars pressed to his scowling brow. Dean spoke as I approached, anticipating my question, "A burglary suspect just ran across the river." I could barely make out the young man in a Pendleton shirt moving through the thick brush on the other side of the stream. "It looks like he's going to try to get to the drainage tunnel from William's Canyon." I offered, sounding very much like a seasoned detective. Of course the only way of escape from the other side of the river was to climb up the side of the hill to the drainage tunnel, but far be it from me not to state the obvious. "That's what I'm thinking, unless he's planning on hiding out until it gets dark." replied Dean, echoing my astute observation. Now I'm getting excited, knowing that I'm about to see some police work close up and in person. Maybe I'll even assist in the apprehension. "So what's the plan Dean? Are you going to go across the river and capture him?" Dean, shot me a look as though I just said the sky was green. "Are you nuts? Do you know how cold that river is? I'd get soaked. If he doesn't decide to give up, I'll arrest him tomorrow, or the next day. I know where he lives."

Feeling a little dejected, I did the only thing I knew to do at that point. "Would you like a cup of coffee Dean?" He smiled and said that would be great.

Deputy Dean and the Rattlesnake Shoot-Out

Hopefully you looked at the map of Camp Williams at the beginning of this book. I love maps at the beginning of books; it's so "Hundred Acre Wood". And if you did, you know that our cabin was in close proximity to the general store/café. It was convenient for my wife Patti to come over and visit while I was working. A quick step out the cabin door and you were practically in the store, at least within talking distance to the back window. One afternoon while it was just Deputy Dean, myself and some flatlanders in the store, not doing much of anything, Patti decided to pay me a visit. As she came out of the cabin, I heard her screaming my name. Sometimes that's a good thing, and sometimes not. This time it was not such a good thing. A rattlesnake had decided to take up residence on the steps leading out of the cabin. When she saw it, as she was walking down the steps, she jumped straight up and did one of those running in the air things that I thought only cartoon characters could do. Patti came through the back door of the store and hurriedly explained the situation, much to the delight of the flatlanders and Deputy Dean.

Suddenly the whole mood of the store was transformed. It was no longer just simply a pleasant afternoon, it had become, "Raiders of the Lone Rattler". Deputy Dean saw this as a great time to demonstrate his courage, cunning and ability to chew and talk at the same time to the now very attentive crowd. Dean slowly pulled out his revolver to gasps and school-girl

giggles. (I shouldn't have giggled). He explained, as he emptied out the slugs, how he was going to replace the regular bullets with snake shot. I'll further explain the importance of this when I relate a story regarding another law enforcement officer of the mountains. Rattlesnakes put citizens in peril and Dean was now going to put his life on the line to face down a venomous viper. And we were all invited to the party. Once he had set the stage for his momentous event, he and his newly formed entourage exited the front of the store on their way to adventure.

I exited through the café's rear door. My cabin was literally ten steps out the back door, and given the fact that I kept a .22 caliber revolver loaded with snake shot right inside my front door, I was already facing off with the snake when the Raiders of the Lone Rattler, led by gun in hand Deputy Dean, came through the gate to see the snake. "I've got it Dean." I said as I raised my gun and fired. Oh boy, Dean was not happy. There are things that you don't want to mess with in the world, a woman scorned, the IRS and Deputy Dean when his thunder has just been stolen. His face had a look of amazement and anger with a little bit of sadness blended in. Thankfully there is more to dispatching a rogue rattler than just shooting it. Because of the danger posed by the snake's fangs and the delivery method of the venom, the head must be cut off and disposed of properly. Rattlesnake fangs have a venom sack near the base of the fang that pushes the venom into the hollow fang when pressure is applied to the sack. So the introduction of venom into the victim is not automatic and can take place long after the snake is dead. This is why baby rattlers are far more dangerous than the adult snake. Rattlesnakes are born with a full allotment of their venom, but since the fangs of the young snakes are shorter than the older snakes, they tend to release all of their venom on the first strike, where the adult may not release any venom at all or may have to keep biting down in order to force the venom out.

Now back to our snake adventure. Dean slowly pulled out his buck knife and explained to the group of onlookers what he was doing and why. (Of course, you already know what and why.) After being asked, told actually, by Dean to get a tin can, I returned so he could put the snake head in its final resting place. After he safely sealed it away, he cut off the rattles and gave them to a very excited young girl in the crowd with her parents. In case you didn't know, snake rattles make wonderful gifts. Keep that in mind if Valentine's Day or an anniversary is coming up.