The Other Side of the MOUNTAIN

The legacy of this man included the preservation of a pristine wilderness, but for those whose lives he touched, there was much more.

IT WAS NOT AN EASY CLIMB. You had to put hip boots on to cross the creek, and it was a difficult creek to cross, even in the low water of autumn. There were no trails up the mountainside save for broken threads of game trails, and every step was over downfall. But as in any pilgrimage, merit is not gained without suffering, and the greater the suffering on one side of this mountain the greater the reward on the other. For on the backslope of the ridge, God had wrested from the rock a canyon of surpassing beauty, backed by an amphitheater of 9,000-foot peaks and a stream that ran like a song through larkspur meadows and cathedral stands of spruce on its arrow to the Gallatin Valley below. ■

I had climbed to the top of the ridge with a rifle in my hands, but I'd come not so much to hunt elk as to pay homage to the canyon, which had been under an imminent threat of being clearcut for several years, and to pay my respects to a man who had worked very hard to save it. He had coined the phrase "vestpocket wilderness" for this place, for along the 90-mile front of the Gallatin Mountains it was the only unroaded and unlogged drainage that remained. If the canyon's virgin forests were an anachronism in a range that had been valued only for its timber, then the man was a throwback as well. He evoked memories of an era when outdoorsmen wore plaid wool shirts and smoked pipe tobacco, when a man made his own boat and carved duck decoys out of blocks of cork salvaged from old ice chests.

To enter the century-old cabin he'd fixed up on the streambank at the mouth of the canyon was to step back into time. There would be a pot of black coffee on the stovetop, a fire in the hearth, a couple of martinis on ice. The luxurious pelt of a mountain goat stretched across the roughhewn walls. His wife would smile at you from a tanned face, her white laugh lines spreading into her temples. She would serve up a feast of antelope roast and sweet corn from the garden. That might be followed by an impromptu jug band session, and you'd be asked to jitterbug and better know how. Then there would be tobacco. There would be stories. There would be more martinis. Through the smoke haze your eyes would drift to the opposite wall, where a portrait of your host done in harsh, black lines glared back at you, one eyebrow cocked high, his stare penetrating.

"I smoke too much, drink too much, make love too much," he said to me the first time I was invited to dinner. He nodded his salt-and-pepper beard thoughtfully. "Yes," he mused aloud, "I like my vices."

When my friend Joe Gutkoski got wind that Plum Creek Timber Company planned to log two sections of old-growth out of the heart of the canyon, he called me to ask about this man. He said he was trying to organize a citizens group to protest the cuts and was hoping to get the residents who lived at the mouth of the canyon involved. "That way," he said, "it won't look like the whole thing was planned by a bunch of rabble rousers like myself." He knew the man was a writer and thought it would be good to have him on board.

"But I don't know," Joe said, "I heard he thinks he's Hemingway." I told him that was an impression the man was quite capable of giving.

And to a degree I believed the comparison was deserved. Like Hemingway, he had come from a big city. Like Hemingway, he had moved to the country at a young age, had learned to hunt and to fish, and had written of these pursuits with words that were as clear as the water that tumbled down the stream. Like Hemingway, his was a forceful personality. With his black hair, pointed beard, aquiline nose, and finely drawn mouth, he looked like a benevolent Satan, and though he was not a physically imposing man, I was always a little bit on guard in his presence.

But the darker currents that troubled Hemingway's life, I'd never seen surface at the mouth of the canyon. If I had any criticism, it was *(Continued on page 66)*

BY KEITH MCCAFFERTY
ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID JOHNSON

of the firelight, stood the dark form of the Jeep. Last year I feared it was headed for oblivion, but—pleasant surprise, indeed—it has emerged from the gloom, updated for the 1990s. No doubt, the Grand Cherokee sports a more refined appearance, but it still has the guts to get you to the places that stir your heart.

MOUNTAIN

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that he appeared to be just a little too happy with himself, that his self-proclaimed *joie de vivre* bordered on self-indulgence. He spent all his winters on the Sea of Cortez in Mexico, shooting pintails and fighting snook in the cuts among the mangrove islands. He celebrated his returns to Montana by throwing legendary Fourth of July parties that attracted dozens of people—relatives from New York, old cronies from Mexico, opera stars, mountain hippies, young writers he had taken under his wing. He sat on the porch with his drink in his hand and his retriever at his feet, all that big sky overhead and the good scent of the pines in his nostrils. It was all his. He took it for himself. He loved it.

"No," I said to Joe, "I don't think you can expect much of an extended effort from that direction."

But in this I was wrong, for at one of the first meetings the group held in the spring of 1989 the man stood up to say a few words. He began by announcing that he wasn't much of a "wilderness freak" or "tree hugger," and acknowledged that times were tough in the timber industry and that timber represented needed jobs. But he also asked whether the profit made from a few thousand board feet of lumber would offset the millions of hours of diverse recreation that the canyon could offer. Would it cover the money that recreation would generate during the next 100 years, for that's how long it would take for the clearcuts to regenerate? Who, at the end of a century, would have endured the greater loss?

He composed a letter to express his concerns. Cottonwood Canyon, he wrote, was a "vital thread in the rich fabric of outdoor recreation enjoyed by us all. . . . It is Gallatin County's vest-pocket wilderness; the last of our small-time splendors.

"Realize," he concluded, "there are viable alternatives to clear-cutting Cottonwood: land-swaps, trades, outright purchases, or simply a moratorium on roading and cutting until an agreement acceptable to all parties can be worked out."

The words set a tone for negotiation that is regrettably missing from most timber disputes in the Rocky Mountains. A hand had been extended. Business would be conducted with a spirit of cooperation and with mutual respect. He posted the letter to more than 100 people who had fished or hunted with him up the canyon, urging them to write their congressmen and help the group establish a fund. As the newly elected president of the Concerned Citizens for Cottonwood (CCC), he would mass-mail many letters over the next two years. There would be less time to visit his trout streams, fewer stories of their treasures. Instead, his computer printer would roll out copy after copy of reports on timber values and environmental assessments.

All of the alternatives he had mentioned would be tried in turn. A land swap with the Forest Service was proposed, considered, and declined. The CCC sought to negotiate a buyout of the two sections that were to be logged, but Plum Creek Timber balked, saying it wanted to sell four sections it owned in the canyon, thus raising the price. There were hills and valleys in these early stages of the talks. But Plum Creek did not bring in bulldozers to break ground for the logging road it had threatened to build. The doors to its offices stayed open and the trees continued to stand.

Charlie Grenier, vice-president of Plum Creek's Rocky Mountain region, negotiated with the CCC and credits its president for "keeping us at the table."

"He had a voice of reason," Grenier said. "If we had more people like him to deal with, we could come up with better solutions [to timber disputes]."

The man also began to engender respect from an environmental community that had been initially skeptical, that had suspected he was probably another "NIMBY" (Not In My Back Yard), a rural resident who cared less about logging until it spoiled the view from his bay window. Such a man might be counted on to raise his voice at a public hearing and perhaps to write a letter or two, but would fade from the fight over the long haul.

By the end of the summer any doubts of his leadership had vanished. He had enlisted the support of Montana Senator Max Baucus, who promised to try to secure federal funds to buy Plum Creek's sections in the canyon. He had also managed to persuade both of the state's congressmen, Democrat Pat Williams and Republican Ron Marlenee, to visit his cabin to discuss the canyon's future. This was something of a coup, for though Williams was a long-time supporter of wilderness, Marlenee was decidedly not. He liked to call environmentalists "fern feelers" and "prairie fairies." He was invited to take a ride in a helicopter to see with his own eyes the quiltwork of clearcuts in all the surrounding drainages of the Gallatins. Bob Gibson, the supervisor of the Gallatin National Forest who had indicated that acquiring Plum Creek's sections was low on his list of priorities, went up with him. They came back down committed to working toward a solution.

Many people said it was only politics that had brought so many opposites to the same table. Gutkoski disagreed. "The genius he [the CCC president] had was that he could maintain his dignity and honesty no matter who he was talking to," Gutkoski told me that summer. His manner demanded that you treat him with respect and consider what he was saying, Gutkoski said. "He was sort of a 'hail' fellow. I don't think he ever met a man he didn't like."

The first real victory was won in September, when Senator Baucus persuaded the Senate Appropriations Committee to award $1 million to the Forest Service for the purpose of buying Plum Creek's lands in Cottonwood Canyon.

The notice CCC's president sent to its members was ecstatic. "FLASH!!!! WE DID IT FOLKS! WE DID IT FOLKS! . . . There are still Ts to be crossed and Is to be dotted, and we'll begin doing that at a meeting next Wednesday. Stay tuned for the next (and hopefully last) update."

But the celebration was premature. There would be many more updates, for Plum Creek wanted nearly four times the awarded amount, and the CCC would have to dig deeper into its pockets to hire a timber appraiser to place a value on the trees, so that they would have a figure from which to dicker. "We are frustrated," read a letter from the president's cabin in July of 1990, "but mindful of the dictum 'illegitimus non carborundum' which roughly translates as 'Don't let the bastards grind you down.' "

He wouldn't. But life was grinding him down, and even as the Concerned Citizens for Cottonwood and Plum Creek Timber inched toward a settlement, his enormous vitality was seeping away. He began having trouble keeping food down while in Mexico in the winter

of 1991. Upon his return to Montana in the spring, he was diagnosed as having stomach cancer.

Doctors gave him less than a year to live. They handed him booklets about how to cope with dying. The books were of no use to him. He told his friends that they were written by people who hadn't done what they wanted in life.

"We've celebrated life, not just lived it, and I ask you to continue doing so," he wrote in a farewell letter to his friends late that summer. He said that he was not afraid of dying. "As a hunter I have been witness to death many times and it's given me a very comfortable perspective. Ultimately, we're no different than a trout or a deer, and death is simply the termination of life. As a matter of fact, I view it as another great adventure into unknown country."

A consummate professional, he wrote stories until the end. Reading them now, one would never imagine that at the time he was suffering from a pain so great that he likened it to having strings radiating from his stomach, "strings," he wrote, "that are taken up a half turn each day by some sonofabitch with a thumbscrew."

Instead, his stories are a celebration of wild places, of sleeping under the stars, and of the long winter's nights spent carving duck decoys. He wrote this of the last hunt he would ever make for deer. "A fruitless morning? Not at all. I had seen more than a dozen deer and I had found our Christmas tree. I was reminded of a Navajo blessing: 'Beauty above me, beauty below me, beauty behind me, beauty before me, beauty all around me.' In the timber and the terrace, the ridge and the glen, the smell of the spruce and the softly falling snow I had found a feast for the senses." He was writing of Cottonwood Canyon.

Among the last words he wrote were a love letter to his wife. He entered the unknown country on an Indian summer day, and his ashes are buried under a stone a few yards from Cottonwood Creek.

When I climbed to the top of the ridge to look down into the canyon of that creek, I thought I might be able to hear the music of his banjo or the rich timbre of his voice. I thought I might be able to bring a little closer the memories of a man I had come to respect greatly and who I wish I had known better. But there was only the sound of wind. Even the creek, glinting from below, could not carry its song this high. His flesh had returned to earth, but the earth endured. The trees in this canyon were still standing.

(Epilogue: In October of 1992 Plum Creek Timber Company sold its four sections in Cottonwood Canyon to the Forest Service for $1.2 million. The Forest Service is negotiating a public access through private land at the mouth of the canyon. It will be called the Norm Strung Trail.)

STORIES IN THE SNOW

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averaged 23 inches on the flat and slightly shorter when climbing, and the hind hoof was placed almost precisely in the print left by the fore hoof), so I knew he was at ease. From time to time he'd break into a trot (the stride here was between 33 and 38 inches, and the prints were slightly splayed), but he was still not spooked. Mule deer trot almost as often as they walk. (Deer are less apt to make mistakes when walking or trotting than when hurrying, because they have more time and concentration to sense danger. That's one reason the biggest bucks seldom run.)

The buck meandered through chaparral, bitter brush, and mountain mahogany, mule deer staples, and judging by the quantity of bark, twigs, and small, shiny mahogany leaves on the snow, he was ravenous. The snow had quit shortly before dawn, so he'd browsed in daylight, something unheard of (except during the rut) during hunting season when adult bucks are almost exclusively nocturnal.

The trail led across an open slope as the buck browsed and meandered from bush to bush, before leading up a shallow ravine toward the ridge above. Before long, it began to meander again, but this time the buck wasn't feeding; he was looking for a bed. Judging from the trail, he'd select it just as carefully as he would during hunting season. He wandered out to a point, stood a moment as if contemplating its bedding potential, then decided against it and climbed farther up the ridge. I trailed cautiously, watching above, aware the air was warming and rising and the buck would eventually scent any danger below him even if he didn't see it.

A sixth sense told me he'd already bedded, and a moment later I was somehow convinced of it. I could almost feel the animal's stare, but he at least hadn't scented anything or he'd have raced off. I carefully scanned above with binoculars; it took several