

**IDAHO, WYOMING, and MONTANA  
Or Rambling On by a Wandering Man**

**by**

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Psalms 121:1 I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.

Psalms 121:2 My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.

Idaho and Montana weren't even in my travel plans two weeks before I left Texas in July, 2004. My wife Karoline and daughter Michelle had made plans to drive Michelle's truck to Casper, Wyoming, and my other daughter Cheri and her husband John were driving to Laramie, Wyoming with Camyrn, my 15-month old cute granddaughter for the July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend. John's relatives were having a reunion on a ranch outside of Laramie, and Karoline's family was having a get-together in Casper. Initially, I had thought that I would be flying the Stinson up to Casper to meet everyone there. Wrong! It had gone in the shop to have an annual inspection performed in May; that saboteur Murphy guy must have found out and decided to thwart the inspection to an expensive lingering-on and waiting-for-parts story that still isn't finished at the time of this writing (July 16<sup>th</sup>, which, by the way, is the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the launch of Apollo 11). Karoline suggested that I fly commercially because she knew that every couple of hours they would be stopping to free Camyrn from the confines of the car seat. It is amazing that millions of children made it to adulthood while sleeping in the area above the back seat in front of the rear window, or had the entire back to roam around. Sometimes they rode in the bed of pickup trucks.

Everyone else travelled in a loose caravan, and left two days before I did. At Ft. Collins, John and Cheri and Camyrn headed up U. S. Highway 287 to Walden, Colorado and on into the Wyoming ranch, while Karoline and Michelle went on up to Casper on I-25. I flew on Southwest Airlines to Boise, Idaho, since I had spent very little time in this mountainous state. My flight left Houston on July 2<sup>nd</sup>; I met Karoline and Michelle at the home of Karoline's parents the next day.

### **Friday, July 2nd**

Enroute to Boise, the plane stopped at Las Vegas, and then I had to change planes in Reno. Karoline likes to go to Las Vegas every now and then; I gave her a call from my cell phone while sitting on the plane and told her to guess where I was. When she asked "Idaho?" I smugly told her Las Vegas. What even made it worse for her and especially for Michelle, I told them that the entire time I spent at the Reno airport I had not dropped one quarter into a slot machine. And I even took something out of my camera bag, sitting it upon an empty chair in front of a machine that had a lit sign above it announcing the

jackpot was over \$9 million. I would rather use that quarter for flight money than throw it away chasing almost impossible odds.

Southwest Airlines allows passengers to use portable GPS receivers, so I tracked our route to Las Vegas using my portable flight GPS receiver. While I enjoyed having this electronic marvel along for the ride, I liked identifying our position simply by looking out of the window of the plane. Within about thirty minutes or so from take-off, we passed over miles of cloud orchards prior to entering the green Texas Hill Country, and then there were the dry white scars around Midland where hundreds of oil wells have been drilled. Guadalupe Peak, the highest point in Texas appeared, then the engine of the left side of the Boeing 737 ate it. At 489 knots, from my window seat, it looked like the peak went into the intake, and I didn't see it anymore. It just disappeared from view. Sometimes I have seen clouds and even towns being eaten by the voracious jet engines. A few minutes later we flew over Las Cruces, New Mexico, and it thrilled me to see the Tracking and Data Relay Satellite (TDRS) Ground Station near the city. This ground station controls the same satellites that the space shuttle and space station utilizes, and I have had occasion visits there in the past. In fact, in 1982 I was even offered a job there.

Sitting next to me on the Houston to Las Vegas segment was a four-year old boy. He colored me a page with an airplane on it out of a coloring book. He and his family travel to Las Vegas a few times a year. About the time the "Tray tables are to be locked and seats are to be in their forward position" announcement came over the loud speaker, Lake Mead and Hoover Dam appeared on my side of the plane only to be sucked into the jet engine; a few minutes later the child was asking his father "When are we going to be there?" just as the wheels touched down.

In all my years of flying, I had never flown between Las Vegas and Reno. Prior to touchdown I saw Lake Tahoe. I don't care about the gambling, but would like to explore the area around the lake. While waiting in line for the flight to Boise to arrive, an old (perhaps a little older than me) Indian started talking to me. He travels often, but started telling me about his life of hunting and fishing. He told me once he had shot a buffalo during a cold winter; as he was field-dressing it, he dropped something into the animal's chest cavity. He leaned into the cavity and was engulfed around his shoulders by the buffalo and was warmed by its body heat. The Indian didn't tell me, but I sensed he had felt something spiritual. He introduced himself and said that his name is Butch. Well, as most of my friends know, that is my nickname. Now when somebody asks me why I have that name, I can say, "It's an old Indian name!" I could have listened to his stories all day.

Nine years ago in July, when I was in the Naval Reserves, I reported to Washington D. C. to do my annual two weeks duty. Commander (now Captain) Randy Nees told me in a very apologetic voice upon my arrival, "Matt, I hate to

do this to you, but I have to send you to Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota.” “Don’t throw me into that brier patch” said brother rabbit. For a guy raised in Wyoming, being sent to Rapid City was like having to stay after school in Mr. Van Burgh’s class for leaning back in a chair and waking up half the class when the chair fell backwards – and discovering the rock samples he had in the back room. It was a dirty job, but someone had to do it. Walking out of the Boise airport terminal to the rental car was very similar to walking out of the Rapid City Airport: About 75° F., low humidity, clear and deep blue skies with a few scattered white cumulus clouds, and that sweet smell of the prairie. Houston was probably twenty degrees warmer, with a humidity to match. Back in the mountain states once more, the primordial stirrings and longings of my heart easily identified with the dog Buck in Jack London’s The Call of the Wild. Boise reminded me of Casper.

So I headed East on I-84 and then to I-86 and ended up the day by driving on I-15 to Idaho Falls, where I spent the most money for a Motel 6 that I have ever paid. For 280 miles I drove across the prairie, through farmlands, over some flat open country and some hilly country, with the windows down. Sixty-five miles out of Boise traffic came to a stop – where I felt agitated for a while, then enjoyed watching the Snake River flow on my right side. When I passed by the wreck, I felt guilty, for I had complained because my journey had been delayed thirty minutes while ambulance crews loaded up two dead or severely injured men whose Ford F-250 powerstroke diesel truck lay on its smashed cab with its wheels up in the air like armadillo road kill and their fifth wheel trailer gutted out as if it had lost an argument with a tornado. A few minutes before the accident the men probably had been talking about a fishing trip or a canoe trip they had been planning for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend.

Somewhere along the way I passed by Fort Hall Indian Reservation. Come on people, if you are going to force the Indians to live on a reservation, you ought to at least put their tribal name on the sign, and not the name of some fort where the soldiers lived whose duty was to kick the Indians off their native lands. Within a few miles of Fort Hall, I drove by Massacre Rocks. I bet the site of the Massacre wasn’t named for the location where the white soldiers killed the Indians in an early morning attack.

Afternoon thundershowers built up, splattered the windshield with big raindrops, streaks of lightning flashed through the dark clouds, the thunder boomed and rolled, and I could smell the fresh scent of the summer rain. One place would have been a good place to take photos, and I didn’t, and I regret it. On my left, the sun sat low on the horizon, on my right shimmering green fields contrasted against the dark stormy clouds. Usually these storms produce good rainbows, but I didn’t see any on this day. I ate at a truck stop near American Falls; teenagers hung out here early this Friday night. I ordered a hamburger and was pleased when served home cut French fries, with the skins still on. I had to laugh upon seeing the sign on the wall above the coffee pots:

"Coffee: 1 cup = 94 cents\*  
1 Hour = \$1.20  
All morning = \$2.00  
All afternoon = \$3.00  
All day = \$4.00  
Take lunch break, go home = \$4.50  
Ask for weekly rates!"

(\*I had to write the word 'cents' out, because in this world of computer machines, there is no cents symbol on the keyboard. But there was one on my old typewriter! Another useless tidbit – each letter for the entire word of "typewriter" is on the upper row of letters on a standard keyboard.)

Going into Pocatello, I felt a sense of peace and enjoyment racing the four-engine Union Pacific train with perhaps a hundred flat cars rolling down tracks that ran parallel to the highway on my right, stacked with double-decker semi-truck trailers with the names of various shipping lines painted on their sides, and the airport on my left, and mountains off in the distance. Trains, planes, rains, and mountains – what a combination!

After a few more miles driving down the road with the windshield wipers wishin', wooshin', and the thunder boomin' and the lightning ziggin' and a zaggin', and the rain splishin' and splashin' on my left arm and in my face, I arrived in the city of Idaho Falls, tired but happily intoxicated by the clean fresh rain/sage scent from the prairie and the mountains.

### **Saturday, July 3<sup>rd</sup>**

Notes on the back of the coffee-stained rental car contract jacket:

Idaho Falls to Jackson, U. S. Hiway 26

Gassed up car in Idaho Falls, bought chocolate covered donut for breakfast, it tasted so good had to buy another.

Steam and fog off Snake River, passed monoliths of haystacks, bales stacked like beehive supers

Something I wrote but can't read, and then I continued, Swan Valley, Purple Sage, could see how Zane Grey found words to write book, "Riders of the Purple Sage"

Drove by Covered Wagon Saloon. Authentic Western names like that... (I guess I was going to finish the sentence when I wrote the story, but I don't remember my thoughts)

Drove past good size lake, probably a lot of fish there, then through mountain pass, on into Wyoming, had to honk horn like I always do when I'm coming back home. If I took road to South, I could go to Afton, where the Husky airplane is built – should have thought about that in advance so I could tour the factory.

I arrived in Jackson just before 8:30 AM. My cap with the words “Jackson Hole” and an elk embroidered on it and covered with hat pins needed washed or replaced, so I stopped by the same store where I had bought it last year and found another. After buying the cap and a 2005 calendar with photographs of the Tetons, I started the car and turned left by the park with an arch of elk antlers in each corner in downtown Jackson, drove past the National Elk Refuge where Hawks Abbott and I had seen the herd of migrating elk and the lone wolf in February, 2003 (the “WOW!” Meter really pegged that day), and continued on to the Jackson airport.

At Jackson Hole Aviation, I met Matt Sergent who gave me more mountain-flying instruction in the same Cessna 172 that Hawks and I had flown. The Cessna seems out of place with all the corporate jets, but I probably had more enjoyment flying it than the corporate pilots who quickly climb to altitude and engage the autopilot. Matt (seems strange for me to call somebody else by that name) is 31, the same age as Michelle. On this nearly cloudless morning with the sky the deep-blue color for which Wyoming is famous, we flew parallel to the Tetons off our left wing, followed the Snake River, climbed to over 13,000 feet, crossed over a mountain range to the north, and just enjoyed the view for 1.2 hours. Too soon, we had to go back. I have told Karoline that when I am an old man (older than now), sitting in my rocking chair, waiting to board the flight to the angels, it would please me immensely to be passing my last days on earth looking at the Tetons, and it would probably much cheaper than throwing my money away in a nursing home.



Flying in front of the Tetons in a Cessna 172 owned by Jackson Hole Aviation



**This is the Cessna 172 belonging to Jackson Hole Aviation that I flew.  
Notice the American Airlines jet taking off in the background.**

I have seen more of the Tetons in the last five or six years than I ever did while I lived in Wyoming. This Fall, Karoline and I are planning on a driving trip through the Western states, and surprise, surprise, we already have reservations to stay one more time at the Signal Mountain Lodge at Jackson Lake with good views of the mountains.

After my flight I still had about 300 miles to drive to Casper. With the Tetons gradually diminishing in size in my rear-view mirror, I stopped and ate a prime rib sandwich at the Hatchet Lodge and Restaurant. A young man from Alabama waited on me; he left his home to see the west and to learn more about handling horses. He normally works construction but a few weeks earlier he had stopped in the restaurant for a bite to eat and was offered a job waiting tables. He wants to stay in the area through the Winter so he can spend time around the snow. When he left home, his friends and family told him that he was crazy, but when it comes time for him to reflect upon his life while sitting in a rocking chair, he may be wishing that he could see the Tetons from that chair.

Within a few miles of the Hatchet place, I passed by Togwotee Lodge, where Karoline and I have stayed a couple of times, and Hawks Abbott (aka CAPT Oozic – that’s another story sometime) and I stayed in 2003. Great place, and in the Winter time its a happening place for the snowmobilers. Near this place is where the Tetons first become visible when driving West from Dubois. The photo on the next page was taken at sunrise one summer when Karoline and I stayed at the lodge:





Tetons at sunrise from Togwotee Lodge

From Dubois, heading East, the road parallels the Wind River, and the mountains give way to reddish painted desert scenes. Eventually, the Wind River joins the Big Horn River near Thermopolis, which flows into Montana, empties into the Missouri River, flows to the Mississippi near St. Louis, and goes on down to the Gulf of Mexico. Near Hardin, Montana, one of the tributaries to the Big Horn River is the Little Big Horn River, from where the words of the 1960's song of "Please Mr. Custer" just had to have originated. The song goes something like this: "Please Mr. Custer, I don't want to go, please Mr. Custer, I don't want to die." And it ends with the words, "And there I stood with an arrow in my back." In high school, I worked as a dishwasher at Woolworth's. Once I sang that last stanza as loud as I could and shortly afterwards, the store manager came to me and wanted to know what was wrong. He had heard me from the other side of the store. He wasn't amused.

Driving towards Riverton, I realized that I was travelling in buffalo country. How did I come to this bit of knowledge? Well, I tried calling my cousin on my buffalo cell phone right after I passed through Dubois, and the phone text said, "Roaming" so I knew I was where the buffalo roamed. You know, "Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam..." OK, enough of the corny songs! Just outside of Riverton I made contact with Mike Hughes, husband of my cousin Gay. She was born just a couple of years after me, at a time when her name had a completely different meaning than what has been distorted by the media. It turns out that Gay was enroute to Riverton from Casper, So I called her on her cell phone, and we agreed to meet at the Yellowstone Drug store in Shoshoni. Once, several years ago, Karoline and I were up in Wyoming from Texas and heading to the Tetons; as we drove through Dubois, we unexpectedly saw Ed and Allene Mers, Gay's parents, as they were walking down the street. So, for me and Gay to meet in Shoshoni isn't too far fetched.

Thousands of tourists going to-and-from the Teton and Yellowstone Parks have stopped at the Yellowstone Drug store in Shoshoni for hamburgers and milkshakes. I don't know how old the store is, but it is older than I am, and I was born back in the Twentieth Century! I have no idea how many times over the years I have stopped there. While I waited for Gay to arrive, I wandered around the town and saw old storefronts and the old jail that I had never seen before. Next to Gambles was a wall size painting of an Indian. I just had to take a



photograph. Here I am in the town of Shoshoni, roughly located in the territory where the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians had lived, and this wall painting was of Geronimo, the old Arizona Apache chief. Figure that one out. Once inside the drug store, I ran across a copy of a wanted poster that I bought for my friend Jim Gardner here in Texas. His grandfather had been a stagecoach driver on the Deadwood to Cheyenne route. James Wall's name and photograph (or likeness thereof) were on this poster because he was wanted for robbing that same stagecoach line. The poster said he had an ugly 2-inch scar on his face. When Jim saw it, he asked, "As opposed to a pretty 2-inch scar, or an unsightly 2-inch scar?" The original issue date for the wanted poster was presumably November 1, 1877, with the Cheyenne-Black Stage Company offering a reward of \$1,000 for arrest & conviction, \$200 for a dead body.



Gambles' in Shoshoni



Geronimo



Yellowstone Drug Store



Shoshoni's old jail house

Except for a modern rest stop, which I guess could be somewhat compared to the stage stops of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the hundred miles of road between Shoshoni and Casper has hardly changed at all, not at least in the times I have been on it. U. S. highway 26 may be paved, but it is still only a two-lane road, despite the number of visitors to the national parks, with miles and miles of

prairie, antelope, and sagebrush. Winter driving on this road can be fun. Heading to Casper from Shoshoni, the first “town” encountered is Moneta, which, if I remember right, is only a ranch. Highland and Waltman are the next two towns, each with a population of about 10! My friend John Zullig, whom I mention a little later in this story, once went hunting with me near Waltman. We stayed in an abandoned sheepherder’s cabin. John still tells the story of me trying to make coffee by pouring coffee grounds into a coffeepot full boiling water. I had never made coffee by that old cowboy method, and didn’t have any idea how strong coffee can be by adding a half-pound of grounds and then boiling it for about ten minutes. Neither did John! Powder River is the next town after Waltman, and it’s a metropolitan area with a population of about 100 or 200. A few miles further, a mini-grand canyon called Hells Half Acre is always a fun place to stop to admire the various geological formations, and I regret not stopping this trip. Shortly after passing two or three ranch buildings listed on the map as Natrona, there is a long and old wooden building with sides bursting with “Natrona”, a snow-white soda substance that is supposedly renowned around the world but I don’t remember what for, nor have I ever heard about it nor seen it anywhere else in the world that my travels have taken me. The level of this stuff has always seemed to remain the same, from the time I first remember seeing it in 1951. I wonder if the first two letters of Natrona, “Na” are the chemical letters for Sodium. I don’t have and idea what “trona” means. And the entire county is called Natrona! Vice-President Dick Cheney and I both graduated from Natrona County High School, but now the school has been renamed after him. All because of this one hundred foot dilapidated building with this snowy white stuff sitting dormant at each end and bursting out the sides. Never in all the years that I have driven by this place have I ever seen any activity, nor any rail cars near this white stuff. Driving this road is about as endless and as boring as this paragraph has been.

Soon, Casper Mountain comes into view, I drive past the airport, and a few minutes later I arrive at the home of Bob and Jeannie Antonovich, Karoline’s parents. She and Michelle are there to meet me, along with many members of her family. After a meal of homemade rolls and fried chicken, everybody was sort of relaxing out in the back yard. Michelle paid one dollar to her cousins, Jeffery and Nathan, to douse me with power squirt guns owned by Karoline’s brother Steve. The war had started. I took off my glasses, and removed my buffalo phone from my shirt pocket. Then I attached a nozzle to the hose, and completely drenched Michelle. Although I won this battle, Michelle told me that sometime it would be payback time. She even reminded me about what Cheri did to extract revenge on me. On Cheri’s twelfth birthday, I woke her up by banging on a fire alarm bell with my trusty old Buck pocketknife. She vowed that someday, when I least expected it, it would be my turn. A couple of years ago, when Bob and Jeannie were down for Christmas and New Year’s, everyone but me were playing cards or a game on New Year’s Eve and I dozed off in my chair. Karoline is not always Miss Innocent. She took out the chili cooking pot and gave Cheri a wooden spoon. It took Cheri about thirty minutes to stop giggling about

how I launched out of my chair when she banged the pot with the spoon right next to my head. All these women just team up against me, the nice guy!

### **Sunday, July 4<sup>th</sup>**

Not much happened during the day until about 2 or 3 PM. Several members of Karoline's family wanted to tube down the North Platte River, but I decided to go see Dana Van Burgh, my friend of many years, whom I first met as my 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Science teacher. As reported in the story I wrote last year, "My Life Around Airplanes", he joined me at the Cape to watch the launch of my friend Joe Tanner on STS-82. Every person needs to have friends such as Dana and his wife Nora, who died several years ago from cancer; when my sister Cathy died in 1968 as a result of a car accident, Nora and Dana were the first people I called. Nora answered the phone that night. I can't imagine going to Casper without giving Dana a call, and hopefully, having a chance to visit with him in person.

After visiting with Dana for a few hours, I drove back to the Antonovich house. Ben and Will were there. Things have changed a little, but for several years they came to stay with us in Bacliff for a week or two. Now Ben is talking about going to live in Australia for a year beginning this Fall (go for it!), and Will has one more year of high school. These guys are the sons of Marge, Karoline's younger sister, whom also died of cancer in 1993. Before Marge died, she made Karoline give a promise that she would take the boys to Disney Land or Disney World. Two or three years ago Karoline fulfilled that promise. Since part of this story is about mountains and the West, it just seems right for me to insert this photo of her, which I took many years ago when Michelle and Cheri were small:



**Cheri and Michelle (about ages 6 and 10) and Marge, Karoline's sister, with Casper Mountain in the background**

The following verse was printed on the Memorial paper at Marge's funeral:

Cancer is so limited  
It cannot cripple love  
It cannot shatter hope  
It cannot eat away peace  
It cannot kill friendship  
It cannot shut out memories  
It cannot silence courage  
It cannot invade the soul  
It cannot reduce eternal life  
It cannot quench the spirit  
It cannot lessen the power  
of the Resurrection

Nine years ago on this date Karoline came back to Texas after attending Marge's funeral. She was a special person. Perhaps this story isn't the right forum to be writing memorials to Cathy, Nora, and Marge, but for me, it's OK.

Back to the travel log:

Last year I spent July 4<sup>th</sup> camped out in Alaska by myself, with the popping and cracklin' of the campfire and the aroma and taste of my coffee giving me more enjoyment than watching city fireworks (I have improved making coffee over the years, John). Fireworks are usually beautiful, but I was enjoying my solitude. In 1998, I spent the 4<sup>th</sup> of July at Machu Picchu, alone again but not lonely. With me (and Karoline) now owning five acres of land on top of Casper Mountain, it only seemed natural for me to spend the night there. Karoline's brother Steve had moved an old travel trailer up there the previous year, so it gave me a place to go. Jeannie made me some coffee that she put in a thermos, and poured the last of the coffee into a big 32-Oz. Cup, which promptly spilled on the carpet of the right front seat of my rental car, and even made the wanted poster look more authentic! Shortly before sunset I drove to my beloved mountain, passing a few deer along the way, looking at Garden Creek Falls from the highway, taking care not to drive too close to the edge of the winding road. It ain't a big mountain, it ain't the prettiest mountain, but it's my mountain. Even now, when I am off in some other place of the world and need to remember compass headings, I always picture in my mind Casper Mountain as being South.

Up on the land, which is clear at the top level of the mountain, I rolled out the sleeping bag, drank coffee and ate some apple pie that I took from the Antonovich house, wandered around to the clearing in the pines where someday I hope to have a cabin, watched the stars in the clear July evening, and enjoyed the peace and quiet, interrupted only by the low frequency booming of a

neighbor's radio or stereo from about five acres away, the same thing that I wanted to leave behind from my house in Bacliff, and I heard the distant booming of the fireworks that the city of Casper set off. About 10 PM the neighbor shut off his boom box, so now the only sounds came from the wind rustling through the pine trees and rumbling thunder. About 11 PM, I went inside the trailer, lit a kerosene lantern, and scribbled out notes for this story. When the rains came at 3 AM and woke me up, I was glad to be dry inside a trailer, instead of having a cold stream of water falling off a tent seam onto the back of my neck. Have you ever noticed how that puddle that builds up in the low spot of a tent always has a built-in radar, so that no matter where you move, it locks on and follows you, and once more, drips cold water down your back?

### **Monday, July 5<sup>th</sup>**

During the night, the temperature dropped. Not low enough to be freezing, but low enough that I hated to leave the warmth of the sleeping bag. The blotches of lightning that I had watched when I first hit the hay had given way to a gray cloudy light rain and fog in the morning. Mom, you would be proud of me – I swept out the trailer, straightened things up, and cleaned my room and took out the trash. A few minutes later I drove to the Jacquic's Elkhorn Canyon Café, located just North of the road that splits to go East to Beartrap Meadow, and then on to my land, or West to go to the Hogodon Ski Area. Jacquic told me she had opened the place several months ago. Initially, I was only going to have a cup of coffee, but she told me that if I ate there, I would be eating the world's best breakfast. Well, with a claim like that, I didn't want to be rude and disappoint a cook by not eating his or her food that he or she probably had woken up hours earlier to prepare and had slaved over a wood-burning cook stove stoked with pine logs that he or she had gathered for many hours the day before after hauling water to wash the pots and pans from that days work. While I waited for the huge "homemade" blueberry pancakes and home fries, I wandered around the place, admiring the superb wildlife photography on the walls from Wyoming and Alaska, and drinking a hot cup of coffee. I didn't disappoint the cook, and he or she didn't disappoint me.

With the rental car in 2<sup>nd</sup> gear, I drove down the mountain road, seldom having to touch the brakes, anticipating and driving the curves with joy and the experience of having driven this road well over a hundred times. I prefer a vehicle with manual transmission, but obviously, since I am writing this story in Texas over a month later I must have made it.

Cheri and John and Camyrn showed up around 10:30 AM at the Antonovich house. Camyrn had her hair in pigtails. She found delight in crawling up the three back porch stairs, and then leaning into my arms to be lifted off the stairs to start the game all over again, tiring out the old grandfather in the process. What a cute and delightful child! Of course, I am completely objective in that statement, and I know that I am not repeating myself.

Later, in the afternoon, Dana Van Burgh and his friend Deb came to the Antonovich house in preparation for another trip up the property. He and fellow teacher Ed Strube had taught a field science course for many years on the mountain. Dana and I had talked several times about going to the mountain together; it finally happened. In my younger days, my impression of working as a geologist in Wyoming was to work for the oil companies, which I did not want to do. About ten years ago I took a college geology course; had I done so as a young man I would probably have entered the field. On this day I had my own private tutor. I rode with Dana and Deb while there was a caravan of two other vehicles filled with other family members. We had a head start, but before we reached the property, the others caught up with us as we were looking at rocks. Dana showed me where uplifting of metamorphic rock had occurred at the curve by the old spring; we stopped at Lookout Point and he told me that that section made him very nervous, because when the loose rocks above us decide it's time to break away, we were not in a safe place. On the way back from the property, we stopped and climbed about one hundred feet near Strube Loop. Dana sat down on one good size rock, and told me that his feet were on rocks about 2.5 Billion years old, while he was sitting a rock that was only a half-a-billion years old. Deb located some mica rocks glittering in the sunlight. She is no slouch herself when it comes to identifying rocks and formations. While on the property, she looked at some of the sandstone rocks laying around and showed me where seashells once had been, even though we didn't find the actual fossil themselves. It is difficult to believe that this area of land, about 8000-feet above sea level, and one thousand miles from the Pacific Ocean, had once been under the sea. Near Story, Wyoming, up in the Big Horn Mountains, I once saw a rock the size of a couch covered with coral, located on top of a mountain that I think is over 10,000-feet high.

I walked with everybody around the property, showing the clearing where I would like to put a log cabin, which is very near where Deb found the rocks with the seashell impressions. Dana commented that I had made a good choice. There are worse days and worse ways to spend one's life than wandering around Casper Mountain with these two people whom are very knowledgeable of the local geology. It turns out the Ed Strube's daughter lives on a parcel of land just off the next turn-off from me, so Dana and Deb wanted to say hello. It was kind of funny. She had cut herself off from the world for three days so she could work on her Master's Thesis. Dana knocked on her door, and she was all distressed how she looked wearing an old sweatshirt, jeans, and her hair messed up a little. Who cared!

Later that evening, John and I took a drive to the Hat 6 Ranch, along a road and new homes that haven't been there very long. The ranch is on the East end of Casper Mountain; I cannot ever remember a time in Casper of not hearing some mention of the Hat 6 during any given month. The same goes for the

Goose Egg ranch at the West end of the mountain. That's another area that has some very interesting geological formations. We arrived back at the house in time to eat the turkey that Bob had deep-fried.

After dinner, Jeannie wanted to show Camyrn off at a nearby bingo hall. Roxie, the lady that runs it, and I grew up together. Her parents had grown up with my mom in North Casper. We had lost contact over the years, but she was at my dad's funeral in 1996, so we renewed our friendship. Roxie and her husband Norm made several trips to Houston so Norm could have cancer treatments, and our friendship grew. In 2004, Roxie and Norm and Gene, my brother-in-law, and I found petrified wood at a place West of Casper. You ought to see the museum of the things Norm collected over the years. After Norm died from the terrible disease, Roxie gave me Norm's belt, with a belt buckle made of walrus ivory and a caribou scrimshawed onto it. (Hawks Abbott gave me a handmade belt buckle with an elk on it earlier this year for my birthday. Both are works of art, and since I like them equally well, I wear each one for a month and then switch.) I decided to show photos of both in this story.



Caribou and elk belt buckles, given to me by Roxie Taylor and Hawks Abbott, respectively

I finished the evening by traipsing back to the mountain and watching the stars on a very clear night, a night so clear that the bands of the Milky Way made me realize one more time how small I am and how great Thou art! And I said a prayer of thanks, and knew also that Jesus had also prayed on a mountain: And it came to pass in those days, that He went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. (Luke 6:12)

Back in the trailer, the lantern started flickering and gasping, like it was running out of steam. So, with the notes of this day's activities scribbled down and the coffee gone, I finally drifted off to sleep, content.

## Tuesday, July 6<sup>th</sup>

Jeannie works in the home health care business. She is very good working with the elderly and small children, and seems to enjoy helping people who need it. She wanted to introduce us to one of her patients, Tom Rankin. For some reason, I thought he was a man in his eighties, so I was quite surprised to



find that he is around 55. He lives near where my dad used to own Johnny's Hamburger and Malt Shop in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Tom has MS, but you would never know it to listen to him. During the few minutes I was at his home, he started talking to me about airplanes. The next time I go to Casper I want to spend more time talking to him about airplanes, and perhaps take him for a drive to our land on Casper Mountain. Tom's positive attitude while being bedridden and doing most of his traveling in a wheel chair have made me feel guilty for complaining about far less troublesome things.

Just a few blocks away from Tom live Joe and Frances Antonovich, Karoline's uncle and aunt. They live a quiet life, but are two of the best people God put on this earth. Frances came from Yugoslavia after World War II, and Joe is living in the same house that he was born in. Once again, these are people we just have to visit when we go to Casper. As always, it was sad saying goodbye to them.

Before we left Bob and Jeannie's house that day, I invited Bob to come up to the mountain with us. When Karoline and I were in Casper last year, he, Jeannie, and Steve went with us to see the land. This year Bob said no, because his knees have been hurting him. Bob laughingly said that his doctor said that he was going to cut Bob's legs off at the knees and beat him with the bloody stumps. Of course, knowing Bob, I am sure he is an innocent victim! When he was in high school, he and some friends hoisted a buckboard wagon on top of the Catholic Church steeple or bell tower, and somehow the Monsignor knew that Bob had something to do with this mischievousness. One year, at Jeannie's suggestion, Bob gave me a realistic-looking chocolate cow patty for Christmas. After 32 years of marriage to their daughter, we know each other quite well, and have had a lot of laughs. If you ask Bob how old he is, he will tell you that he is one year older than Casper Mountain. It has only been a couple of months ago that he retired from delivering Meals-on-Wheels. For years, he drove a school bus for the deaf kids in Casper. Good in-laws!

Anyway, time to head up to the mountain one more time. Although Michelle had gone with us the day before when we went to our land, Cheri and John hadn't seen it. No trip to the mountain is complete without a visit to Garden Creek Falls. Just as this is my mountain, so are the falls. They are narrow and only about 35-feet high, not as spectacular as many other waterfalls in the country, but they become mine to share when I visit them. The rocks that lie beneath the falls are among the oldest in the world, dated pre-Cambrian. Besides, I needed to take some photographs of Camyrn there.

Camyrn, Cheri, John, Michelle, Karoline, and I usually go to Church together. Often, we eat meals together. For the first time in a week, it was just the six of us. We all hiked the short distance from the public parking area to the falls, managed to make the investors of Kodak a little happier, and then drove up the winding road to the property. I took the photo of Camyrn by the tree, and now will

always think of this tree as Camyrn's Tree. Everyone liked the property, but Michelle is a Flat-Lander and does not want to ever have to drive the road to it. I am in my glory when I'm driving on that road. We all stopped and ate lunch outdoors at the Elkhorn Canyon Café. In the years to come, I hope to eat many more meals there.



**Grandpa and Camyrn at Garden Creek Falls**



**Camyrn and Grandma standing next to Camyrn's Tree on our Casper Mountain land**



**Garden Creek Falls**



**All of us at the falls**

Back in town, I said goodbye to everyone and then headed North to Sheridan. From Casper to Kaycee, it is about 76 miles; there is an exit off of I-25 for the town of Midwest around 40 miles from Casper, but from the road you can't see the town. In my younger years I worked in the oil patch as a roughneck on a drilling rig near Midwest. I have never been to the Hole-in-the-Wall, which is around 20 miles or so West of Kaycee, but that's where Butch Cassidy and the

Sundance Kid used to hang out. (Perhaps my name came from that outlaw, instead of the old Indian!) The next town heading North is Buffalo, about 110 miles from Casper. The Big Horn Mountains are West of the Interstate. Probably, next to the Tetons, I love the Big Horns for their beauty. I could write pages about Cloud Peak, and the moose I have seen near the road, and the place in the forest I would try to build a cabin if it wasn't on either BLM or national forest land, and Meadowlark Lake, where my sister Cathy once worked, and Crazy Woman Creek Canyon. I guess I will leave these episodes out now, topic for another round with the computer machine someday.



Crazy Woman Creek

But I can't completely leave out Crazy Woman Creek. While driving on I-25, on the way to Buffalo, I passed by the middle and north forks of Crazy Woman Creek. There is a bridge on I-10 between Houston and San Antonio that crosses over Woman Hollering Creek. Now, I don't know how either one of these creeks acquired their names, but my imagination runs wild: Could the creeks have been named after the same woman? Was it the Crazy Woman Hollering? Was she hollering because the Indians were attacking, or because she was drunk out of her mind, or hollering at her kids to come for dinner, or at her husband for not taking doing something right, or because she had gone crazy? Or did she go crazy because her kids were always hollering? I probably could come up with all kinds of scenarios.

Although on this trip I was heading to Sheridan, I could have turned off the Interstate a few miles North of Buffalo, and gone into Story. I first visited Story at the age of 14, when I went to a youth camp that the Presbyterian Church owns. It was during this week that I saw the coral-encrusted rock on top of a mountain. Somehow, one night the big silver camp bell with a diameter of 4-feet at the base was mysteriously painted bright fire engine red. Now, I didn't have anything to do with the actual painting, but cannot say the same thing concerning the acquisition of the paint! I collected the money for the paint from the other kids and gave it to one of the girls from Sheridan that had to go into town for a saxophone lesson. It

sure was funny to watch the reactions of the people walking sleepily to the chapel and dining hall when they first saw it.

Generally, when I go to Sheridan, I take the Meade Creek exit off the Interstate and head West to see John Zullig, or turn right and go East to see Larry and Kathy Noble. This time I went to Sheridan and met Larry and Kathy. I was best man at their wedding in 1970. In September of last year, they visited us in Bacliff. We go back a long way. Larry is the cousin of Roger Tresler, whom I travelled around the country in a 1960 VW after we graduated from high school. Roger's sister Linda married John. Anyway, Larry and Kathy and I drove out to see John. He wasn't home, but we walked in and made ourselves at home, because he wouldn't have expected anything different. About 30 minutes after our arrival, he and his son Johnny showed up. Johnny and his wife Lottie and their two daughters live in the trailer that Larry and Kathy used to live in many moons ago. I have known Johnny and his older sister Tina since they were just days old. Johnny's daughters are cute and well mannered and were a pleasure to be around.

John, Roger, and I started running around together during our Senior year of high school, on into the 1964 Fall Semester at Casper College. John went into the Navy in January 1965, I went to the Army a month later, and Roger went into the Army in 1966. I was stationed in Turkey when I found out that John and Linda were going to marry. She was only 17, still in high school, and I thought John was too old for her. "She is too young, their marriage won't last long," I thought, at their wedding on September 3, 1966. John, Roger, and I were home on leave at the same time. Linda told me often, giggling as she said it, that their black Renault still had rice in it when they sold it.

We all finished the service about the same time, in 1969. John and Linda settled at the ranch then. Right after Tina was born, I visited them at the ranch for the first time. Certainly not the last. I have no idea how many times I made that trip from Casper. We would all go fishing together, with Linda cooking up the brookie trout that we caught up on the Mountain, or surprising me with raccoon or porcupine Epicurean delights (I think)! I would find myself there at three AM, just because I needed somewhere to go. "It's only Butch, sleeping on the couch".

Deer steak. Almost always we ate deer steak. Once, it was moose steak. Sometimes I would call from a phone booth in the middle of nowhere, and say I was passing through, so thaw out the deer steak. After I moved to Texas, I exchanged shrimp and oysters for deer steak. Linda stood over the stove cooking deer steak for me for countless hours. T. S. Elliot said in one of his poems, "I have measured my life in spoonfuls of coffee". I measured mine in gallons of coffee, sitting around Linda's table, eating deer steak by the packages. What made is so great, is that she loved cooking it for me as much as I enjoyed eating it.

The ranch is my home. Over the years, I have travelled fairly extensively. I always make it back to Wyoming, and when I do, I have to go there. I was going to the ranch before I met my Karoline. She understood that the ranch is part of my life. Once, while passing through, Linda hugged me and said, "Welcome home." In 1970, Roger, his dad, my dad, and I backpacked in the Wyoming mountains. During that time I was thinking about a girl I wanted to marry. That same summer, Linda met her, and told me, "Butch, she isn't the right one for you." When she met Karoline, she said, "Now, that's the lady for you. She is the right one." I guess Linda knew what she was talking about – like I mentioned earlier, Karoline and I have 32 years of good married life.

So many times did Larry and Kathy, myself, and sometimes Karoline and Roger and his wife Mary sit around Linda and John's table, sharing many fond memories and laughs. Larry is the one who sent me the e-mail in Antarctica when I Wintered-over in 1996 about Linda's last day with us. As near as I can tell, I read it within ten minutes of Linda's death.

It seems as though the more I write, the more names of people close to me whom have died find their way into this story. I realize that readers of this story would probably rather not read about the friends and relatives whom I have lost, but for me it is important to mention them. I don't know why it is important at this time, but somehow, it just seems the right thing for me to do.

Larry and Kathy drove me back to Sheridan, where we all realized that our hungry needed filled. After a quick meal, I said adios and drove down the long main street of Sheridan, past the Mint Bar and the King Rope store, filled the gas tank, and watched the sunset over the mountains as I headed on up to Billings, where I spent the night.

### **Wednesday, July 7<sup>th</sup>**

Nothing like taking my time trying to convince myself to sit in front of a computer machine, hammering and banging out a story. Today is actually August 30<sup>th</sup>, not July 7<sup>th</sup> – you can't trust what you read in the papers - and Camyrn is now 17 months old. That reminds me of a story I once read about Sherlock Holmes telling the date of his birthday to the incredulous Dr. Watson, who had just asked about it: "The day before yesterday I was 32, next year I will 35." So good people, what day of the year is the birthday of Sherlock Homes? Let me know when you figure it out! Hint: It has nothing to do with Leap Year. Anyway, this story isn't about anything in this paragraph, so I will return to it, as I sit listening to a reel-to-reel tape that I recorded in the late Sixties, with the Kingston Trio, Christy Minstrels, and the Brothers Four singing rambling songs.

Back to the July 7<sup>th</sup> stuff: The first eighty miles to Bozeman I covered in about one hour and one minute. Then the highway construction crews gave a bunch of drivers the opportunity to see the mountains of Montana through clouds

of dust while averaging 10 – 15 miles an hour. It took an hour to go 4 miles just before the eastern city limits of Bozeman. My first trip to Bozeman was in 1963, when I attended a Presbyterian Church youth event held at the University of Montana. One of my regrets in life is that I didn't go to school there, although I gave it serious consideration. While at the youth conference, I met Clark Welch, a youth counselor whom became a very good friend until he died in 1989. Once, I visited him as I was passing through to Seattle; he took me with him to the city jail, to visit prisoners there. Clark followed the teachings of Jesus that talked about visiting people in prison. By the time I graduated from high school, I had met him on three different occasions, including the camp at Story; he surprised me by coming to my graduation. I didn't even know that he was coming, but after graduation, Roger and I were driving through downtown Casper and I spotted Clark walking back to his hotel. We maintained a friendship for many years; he had served in Korea during the Korean War, so he was always a good sounding post when I was frustrated with the army. The last time I saw him was in 1983. Western Airlines had a special fare to travel to nine different cities in thirty days. That was when I went to Alaska for the first time, not counting the fuel stop in Anchorage on my way to Japan in 1966. Billings was one of my nine stops and Clark picked me up at the airport and introduced me to Dwight, his adopted son. As I am writing this, one of the songs on the tape is about a railroad man. I was thinking just before the song played that I remember driving past some boxcars near sunset when I was with Clark and Dwight. Now, every time I see boxcars I think of Clark and the positive Christian influence he had upon my life.

Bozeman has been one of my favorite places for 41 years – yipes – has it been that long? Besides needing fuel and having the urge to see the place again, I had another reason for stopping – this is the home of Boojum Expeditions, the company that has organized the Mongolian trips that I have travelled. I stopped at their office, but the summer is the busy season for Boojum in Mongolia, and the only person there was a man from Mongolia attending the university. None of the others whom I had previously met or conversed with on the phone were there. I was a little disappointed, but since I hadn't called in advance, I can't be too surprised that other people were going about living their lives without the intrusion of Matt Nelson!

On the road again. Seems like that would be a good title for a song. Maybe I will have my cousin Willie write and sing it! Ah, you don't know if he is my cousin or not, now do you? Neither do I. At Belgrade, on I-90, I saw an exit sign for Yellowstone Park. For some reason that reminded me of the time that Karoline and I were walking around the paths at Old Faithful and heard an elk bugling. Some lady nearby wondered if that was some kind of fire alarm going off. One of the reasons why I don't use a video camera much is because some guy was taping the eruption of Old Faithful, while speaking to his camera, "Oh, this is so marvelous, this is absolutely wonderful..." How boring, I thought, that it would be to have to sit and watch his videos. Near our room window at the Old Faithful Inn, evidence of a buffalo remained. They can be dangerous animals,



and last year when Karoline and I were driving to the Park, one met us on the road several miles East of the entrance. Friends who live near the Tetons had previously told us of one attacking their car, so while we anxiously waited for the buffalo to amper on by, I had the truck in go-gear and was ready to move away quickly.

At Missoula, I took the exit for US Highway 12. At the Idaho border, a sign with the symbol of a winding road said either “Next 77 miles” or “Next 79 miles”. For many miles I drove along the mountains parallel to the Middle Fork, Clearwater River. It’s off the interstate, and I consider it one of the prettier highways I have ever driven. Signs along the way said it was the Nez Perce trail or something similar, recognizing the Indians that helped Lewis and Clark.

As always, looking at these mountains brought to the surface the nagging question of why did I ever leave Wyoming? Of course, back in 1978, the opportunity to work on the space shuttle program might have had something to do with it. As much as I love the West, Wyoming couldn’t give me that chance. So I traded the mountains and elk and mule deer and antelope and the Indian Medicine Wheel in the Big Horns and the geology of the Tetons and Yellowstone and Devil’s Tower and the Wind River Canyon and Garden Creek Falls on Casper Mountain and being able to drive in wide-open spaces with few other vehicles to work on the space program. Did I make a good choice? Yes and no. It has been a thrill to work on equipment that has flown in space. Had I stayed in Wyoming I would have had the regret of not working with the space stuff, and the different trips and adventures that have come my way may not have. In terms of having a job, I don’t know what else I would have done, but it won’t bother me when it comes time to leave the heat and humidity and flat lands and jillions of people and traffic jams of the Houston area behind me.

My destination this day was McCall, where I had a Cessna-172 reserved the next day for a couple of hours with McCall Mountain/Canyon Flying Seminars, LLC. I could easily live in McCall, with its nearby mountains and lakes. Until a week or so before I left Houston, I had no idea that my work on the space program had any connection with anyone in that town. The day I called to see about flying with this company, I had a conversation with an answering machine. A little while later, my phone rang at work, Paige Walker, the lady calling, said, “Hi Matt, you work at the Johnson Space Center.” I must admit, that statement caught me by surprise, but then she went to explain that she recognized the first three digits of my phone number, because she used to work there. Turns out, she knew some of the same people I have worked with, and additionally, her husband, Dave Walker, had been an astronaut, but had died three years earlier of cancer – seems like this story is full of cancer victims. She asked where I worked, and I told her Building 44, where I worked on the space shuttle and space station communications systems. It’s a small world stuff: Paige had previously worked as a co-op in the same building as I do, and at one time or another, had worked on the Electronic Still Camera, which was a project I had



also worked on as a civilian and also when I was attached to the Naval Space Command as a reservist. The connection goes even further.

Dave Walker flew on four shuttle missions. One was STS-30, and one of the astronauts that flew on that mission was Dr. Mary Cleave. Nora Van Burgh, whom I spoke of earlier, had once heard Dr. Cleave talk, and then talked to her afterwards. So I once went to Dr. Cleave's office and requested that she sign two photos of herself for me to give to Nora. Dr. Cleave said, "I remember talking to her!" When I told this to Paige, she said that it was Dr. Cleave who introduced her to Dave Walker. Paige rented from Dr. Cleave. When I gave Nora the photos of Dr. Cleave, I also gave her another one of the shuttle's Ku-Band system, which I have spent many years of my life working on. On my wall at home I have a collage of photos that was signed by the crew of STS-53 for my support of the Electronic Still Camera effort. Dave was the commander of that mission. Then, while I was in Alaska in 1995 for training before I went to Winter-over in Antarctica, STS-69 flew. Dave Walker was also the commander for this mission. On the road to Poker Flat, which is outside of Fairbanks, there is a place that is a bar and a restaurant. I left an STS-69 decal at the bar, because Ken Cockrell was flying as the pilot on the same mission. I knew him through my association with the Naval Space Command. Additionally, Barbara Morgan, who was backup to Christa McAuliffe, the teacher that perished in the Challenger, is now an astronaut herself, (although I don't know her) and is from McCall. In many of my writings I have referred to my work as a communications engineer on the space shuttle's Ku-Band System and the space station's comm systems in the Electronic Systems Test Lab (ESTL), but I have never included any photographs of them. So here goes:



Ku-Band antenna (black round disk) on Shuttle Atlantis



Left: Space shuttle's Ku-Band antenna at ESTL  
Upper: Space station's Ku-Band antenna (left) and S-Band antenna (right) at ESTL  
NASA Space station photos from STS-97 & STS112



International Space Station - white round spot is its Ku-Band antenna



International Space Station – its S-Band antenna is on the upper right, about 1" from right side of photo

**Thursday, July 8<sup>th</sup>**

At 6:30 AM, I met Paige Walker and Marti Wegner, an excellent flight instructor who works for McCall Mountain/Canyon Flying Seminars, LLC. Marti started the 1958 Cessna 172A by pulling an old “T” handle cable located on the instrument panel. Our flight was over the Snake River in the magnificent Hells’ Canyon. The sun gave a glare from the East, so I didn’t even try taking photographs, and I was somewhat intimidated to fly very low into the canyon but that didn’t stop it from being a fun flight. The plane flew well and I could easily have spent many hours flying it.

As the company name implies, McCall Mountain/Canyon Flying Seminars, LLC has several seminars a year teaching pilots how to fly safely in mountains and canyons. From what I understand, it is one of the premier flight training programs in the country dedicated to this purpose, and with its strong emphasis on safety, it is also very highly rated. Several issues of the Pilot Getaways magazine make similar references about this company. Owner Lori MacNichol wrote me in an e-mail, “Aviation safety is what I promote and represent”. Although there are many thousands of pilots who learned to fly in mountains and canyons without the benefit of such professional instruction, for those pilots who are inexperienced, taking such a course just may help keep them alive. Sometime, I would like to take the beginning and advance courses that this company offers. I’m quite sure I would learn a lot of very useful information.

But at least I have had a 15-hour introduction mountain/canyon flying course last year with Parallel Aviation, Inc. out of Campbell River, British Columbia. Besides flying through the mountains and doing some canyon flying, we also landed on a beach at Nootka Island, on the Northwestern part of Vancouver Island. The photo shown below is of the Cessna 172 that I landed.



Parallel Aviation’s Cessna 172 that I landed at a beach on Nootka Island, on the northwest side of Vancouver Island, British Columbia

After saying goodbye to Marti and Paige, I left for Coeur d'Alene, which is located about five hours driving time North of McCall. It is one of those beautiful places that once again made me ask myself why did I live in Texas. Enroute, I took this photo of an old house that caught my interest, wondering what stories it could tell if it could talk:



Old house on US highway 95 between McCall and Coeur d'Alene, Idaho

But besides enjoying the scenery of the drive, I had another reason to go there: To fly a 1946 Piper J-3 Cub on floats with Mike Kincaid, owner of the Mountain Lakes Seaplane company. While I waited for the cub to come back to the dock, I chatted with one of Mike's students, a Hollywood stuntman. The other man who was flying the plane is a pilot of a business jet that goes worldwide. In one of Mike's emails to me after I came home, he told me that he was teaching floatplane flying to a former U-2 pilot.

So Mike and I finally took off, with me sitting in the front seat and him sitting in the back seat of the Cub. The original 65-horse engine had been replaced with a 100-Hp engine, but with two people on board and the weight of the floats, it still seems a bit underpowered. We practiced the standard things in float flying, such as normal, rough water, and smooth water take-offs and landings, and step and plow taxis, and I had a blast. My throat was cotton dry, and my techniques were rusty, but the exhilaration of floatplane flying had not diminished. Mike was patient with me, and after several splash-and-dashes on and off the water, my hour of flying time was over too soon. During the time I spent with Mike, he told me of his years of flying in Alaska as a state trooper.

### **Friday, July 9<sup>th</sup>**

Three different times on this day I took off with Mike for an hour or so of fun flying the Cub. Before I left Texas he suggested that perhaps I could finish

my seaplane rating with him. Since the Stinson could not be flown to Wyoming as originally planned, I thought, "Why not use the money I had planned to use on that trip and see if I could obtain the rating." The first two flying hours of the day I did OK, but the third time I had serious doubts whether or not I could pass the check ride. Mike had me perform rough water landings and take-offs, and I just didn't have the hang of it, although I had done the maneuver well enough earlier. Mike told me to make gentle and small clicks on the stick movement when coming in for a landing, instead of being heavy-handed with it. He didn't want me to flip the plane over in the water, and neither did I. When we came back to the dock, he told me that he knew I could successfully pass the check ride, but that I needed to relax more, and he wrote an endorsement in my pilot's log book recommending me for the check ride. While I was flying, I didn't have much time to enjoy the beauty of Hayden Lake and the surrounding mountains, but I still had enough time in the cockpit to look it over and see the various hues of blue of the water and sky. From the ground, the yellow J-3 Cub sure is distinguishable when it is flying over the lake and trees.

After dinner, I went back to my hotel room and studied for the verbal exam I knew I would be facing the next day. My thoughts were more concentrated on passing the rating than the beauty of Coeur d'Alene, although the images of landing on the lake kept me awake quite a while before I finally went to sleep.

### **Saturday, July 10<sup>th</sup>**

At 9 AM I met Mike at the Coeur d'Alene airport at the Civil Air Patrol hangar. Mr. Richard Pearce, the FAA examiner, flew his twin-engine airplane from Moses Lake, Washington. Mike left me his keys to the hangar and went back to the dock. Mr. Pearce chatted with me for a few minutes and then started asking me questions. He was relaxed about it, and often gave me little antidotes to my answers. I felt comfortable around him, even though when we landed after doing the check ride, he told me that I needed to relax more. In 1997, he had flown a 1946 Taylorcraft with a 65-Hp engine and no electronics nor electrical system onboard around the perimeter of the continental 48 states. To start it, he had to use the ancient method of hand propping. After the exam, I bought his book, Taylored Around the USA, and read the entire thing enroute home the next day, between the times I spent looking at mountains and the canyon lands of Utah.

He announced about 10 AM that it was time to go fly. Very diligently I locked the hangar and put Mike's keys in my pocket, which I found at 10 PM that night in my motel in Boise. I mailed them the next day to Mike, but must admit that I was embarrassed about my mistake.

The wind was blowing from the shoreline by the dock towards the lake. Mr. Pearce told me to do a step taxi and turn 180° and takeoff; he said, "Very nice" right afterwards, so that gave me a little confidence. Often, during the flight



he addressed me as “Mr. Pilot”. We climbed to 3500 feet, where I had to demonstrate a departure stall and a landing stall, fly at slow speed, and perform a couple of 360° turns to the left and right. Then he told me to land in a particular cove, but I missed the one he told me and headed for one that was next to it. After I realized my mistake, he told me to fly over a boat and perform a rough water landing in the boat’s wake. Upon landing, Mr. Pearce remarked, “That was more of an actual rough water landing than a simulated one.” After the next takeoff, he told me to head back to the dock and then had me do one more rough water landing. I kept remembering what Mike told me about handling the stick very carefully. As we taxied near the dock, Mr. Pearce told me that if I docked successfully, I passed. The last time when I was in Alaska, going for my unofficial check ride, was when I hit the dock. I had butterflies and my stomach churned, and a boat with fishermen was moored just off the entrance to the dock, but I carefully taxied around them, shut the engine off, and drifted into the dock at the correct angle. Mike was there to grab the rope on the starboard wing.

After two years of trying and 38 hours of flying eleven different seaplanes, I had finally obtained my Airplane Single Engine Sea rating. Mr. Pearce gave me my new temporary license, Mike and the other two students shook my hand, and I left a very happy camper. I immediately called Karoline, who was on the road heading back to Texas. She did not know that I was even going for the rating at this particular time. I had not told her or anyone else. Then I called Hawks Abbott, Bob Simle, Carl Nepute, and Jim Gardner to tell them the good news.



**What a great day! After two years of trying, I finally received my “Airplane Single Engine Sea” (ASES) rating in a 1946 Piper J-3 Cub from Mountain Lakes Seaplane, Coeur d’Alene, Idaho.**



Matthew A. Nelson, Esq., STS-144, is one happy camper on July 10, 2004 with a new seaplane rating!  
Mike Kincaid, owner of Mountain Lakes Seaplane, took the photos on the previous page and this page.

Soon after the check ride, I left Coeur d'Alene and drove the five-hour distance to McCall, going through Moscow (not the big one and not the one in Texas). Near Lewiston and then again outside of White Bird (if I remember correctly), I drove down some very steep hills with multiple curves that lasted about six miles each. I would have liked to have spent more time looking at the geology. Some miles North of McCall, I passed a sign that I should have taken a photo: "45<sup>th</sup> Parallel - Halfway between the North Pole and the Equator".

Once in McCall, I went to the Ponderosa Grill and ate an elk burger to celebrate. Steve and Carrie Rowley had just opened the place a couple of days earlier. Their daughter Ginelle and adopted son Robby waited on me, and their other daughter, called M.E. (short for Meara Elizabeth) also worked there. Often, people hear what is wrong about America, but these kids are what are right about America. They are very well mannered, and were a pleasure to be around. Steve and Carrie did a great job of raising them, and Carrie told me that a lot of that is due to their church and its family values. I hold different views than the Church of Latter Day Saints, but cannot deny the emphasis it places on family ties.

A couple of hours later I was in Boise. I found a place with log cabins along a river about sixty miles out that I would much rather have stayed if they had rooms, but they didn't, so I stayed at a ho-hum motel near the Boise airport. But my trip certainly hadn't been ho-hum. The next day I flew back to Houston, already missing the mountains, but grateful for once more having the chance to enjoy their splendor. And thanks be to God for giving me my travel bug to see His wondrous works. This story is dedicated to all those mentioned in it who are not here to read it, but somehow know that I wrote about them.

**Amos 4:13 For, lo, He that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind, and declareth unto man what *is* His thought, that maketh the morning darkness, and treadeth upon the high places of the earth, The LORD, The God of hosts, *is* His name**