I couldn’t believe that it was spring already. The Red Alders were sprouting leaves all along Truman Creek Road and the snow was all gone. I was headed for my brother’s place in Truman Creek. He was about sixteen miles from Kalispell, Montana, and half that was a gravel road.

Truman Creek drainage was large and the road that followed the creek up into the mountains was windy and steep in places. I drove along stretches next to the creek, then climbed along the hillside to overlook the creek meandering through meadows below. Eventually the road would lead onto Forest Service land. Continuing could even get you beyond Blacktail Mountain and on down the other side into Lakeside, near Flathead Lake.

But, my brother, Ron, lived just a mile before arriving onto Forest Service land. He owned three acres that included his home, a small cabin, and a small barn with a coral.

My first stay on the property came when I took an early retirement from the US Forest Service. I was free to be wherever I wanted to be, and Truman Creek seemed a good place at the time.

I pulled into Ron’s driveway, and parked near the cabin. The cabin was old, very old. It had been part of an old sawmill operation on that site many years earlier. It was pretty run down, with old papers, thick dust, and droppings from the Wood Rats that ran in and out of the place. It had a remnant of white paint on the outside, and the inside.

It wasn’t much, but I liked it. I could see possibilities as I stood there looking in through the open single door. I could see it cleaned up with a single bunk, and some cooking utensils on the counter next to the sink, and coffee brewing in the corner. Right now there was no sink, nor bathroom, only one small room with no real description to it. But, that was all about to change.

Today, Ron and I would move the cabin to its new location. We cut Lodgepole Pine trees and limbed them, then cut them to length and placed them underneath the cabin. We then pulled with Ron’s red Ford truck, and a borrowed tractor. As the cabin began to roll on the Lodgepole, we placed additional poles underneath it. With many pole exchanges, and wrestling the cabin in and out of turn maneuvers, we finally arrived at the final resting place for the cabin.

We nestled it into a grove of Douglas Fir trees just a short distance from Ron’s split level home. It would be within reach of the septic tank, and a bathroom could be added right away, as well as a kitchen sink, complete with drain and running water.

Large rocks and cut rounds of Fir wood were used to raise and level the cabin onto piers. Soon the windows were clean, the floor swept up, counters cleaned, and even some rough cabinets added. A small table and chair were set next to the small window where I could sit in the morning with my coffee cup and watch the shadow of the approaching sunlight. There was one other window on the side of the cabin, and it provided a view up the hillside, and out toward the corals.
Ron had a wonderful home and a nice property. He usually mowed a large portion of the flat part with his riding mower, keeping the weeds at bay, and encouraging the meadow grass that grew so very well all along Truman Creek.

Days went by and the cabin seemed more like home. I would often take off cross country along the hillside for a day long hike. On one of my many hikes, I noticed something moving in the meadow below me. I strained to see with my naked eye, but discernment was eluding me. Something was jumping up and down. There it was again, up and down. Then I saw. It was a young coyote jumping high in the air and pouncing down onto the tall meadow grass. Over and over again it repeated the jumps. It was attacking something, probably no larger than a mouse.

I watched until I grew bored with the routine. I wondered if that youngster learned anything from its pouncing. And believed that it did receive a reward eventually, maybe a mouse or two for lunch.

There were plenty of coyotes in the Truman Creek Basin, they could be heard most nights, howling as they prowled for something to eat. I remember watching three of them working a hillside one time. I was quite a distance away unnotched by the three. Two of the coyotes moved evenly across the slope, one high, one low, and the third stayed back about a hundred yards following along behind.

I was curious about their strategy, until finally I saw that the two in front jumped a rabbit out of the brush. The rabbit, being very wise, immediately dropped down the slope where the going was very easy, and once it thought it was clear of danger headed back up the slope far behind the two coyotes. The two coyotes didn’t notice the rabbit at all.

However, the rabbit wasn’t the wisest. It had climbed back up the slope right into the path of the lone coyote bringing up the rear. It was a quick take down for the coyote, and lunch was on the table for the three.

Where had these three coyotes learned such skills? This is a question I still ponder years later. A God given instinct, is my guess. God provides all that is needed to survive, even to the animals.

There were Black Bear in Truman Creek, but only seen occasionally. They liked to prowl at night, like most of the forest animals. Ron’s 410 shotgun would fire in the night at times sending one running off into the darkness. The scream of a Mountain Lion, or Cougar, could be heard in the night at times too. All of this is part of what drew me to Montana.

Gary was about nine years old, if I remember right. He might correct me, but it won’t change the story any. Gary was my nephew, Ron’s son. He and I spent a fair amount of time together in those days and I must say they were pleasant ones for me. I missed my two daughters who were far away in Oregon, and Gary almost seemed like a son at the time.

This particular day, Gary and I were going to climb Saddle Mountain. Saddle Mountain could be seen from where I had my morning coffee inside the cabin. I often stared at the mountain through the steam drifting up from my fresh cup of coffee in the morning. I would sip on my first cup there until Ron came out of the house. I would then join him on his deck, or he would join me in the cabin, to talk about the plans for the day.

Soon Gary was bounding across the deck and onto the freshly mowed grass to my cabin door. He had his boots on, and a grin on his face. We had talked of hiking to the top of Saddle Mountain many times, and now it was time to do it.

We were soon on our way. The base of Saddle Mountain was about a half mile away, and we had to walk along local dirt drives, cross side creeks, and fight through brush thickets to get ourselves onto the mountain slope itself. But, soon we were climbing the mountain. About two
thirds of the mountain was sparsely covered in a mixture of Fir, Pine, and Tamarack trees, with mountain bunch-grasses scattered in-between them.

The hiking was hard going, as we chose a more vertical approach to the climb. Often I would change the rate of ascent and contour right or left to allow a time of rest as we carefully moved along the hillside following remnants of an old game trail. But then we would again point our climb more measured toward the top of the mountain.

Finally we cleared the timber line and were now negotiating through the bald portion of the top third of the mountain, cutting through rough outcrops of rock that jutted out of the ground. Sometimes it would be a vertical climb over a ten-foot outcrop before we were on even slopes again.

I noticed as we climbed that Gary was requiring more frequent stops for rest, that his steps were decidedly shorter. He had kept a brisk pace thus far, and it wasn’t surprising that a boy of this age would be wearing down a bit. We continued, stopping often, but soon neared the summit.

‘Another hundred yards,’ I said, looking at Gary. He looked long at me, and then long at the top. Nothing was said, but I knew he was done. His limited reservoirs of strength and persistence was gone. He had just spent the energy of someone twice his age and he had done very well indeed.

I turned my back to him, squatted down and said, ‘hop on.’ He did, and I piggybacked him the short distance to the top. Gary wasn’t carrying any extra weight, so the load wasn’t so heavy. He deserved this ride after all his effort. And besides, I enjoyed extending a hand when I had plenty of energy to spare.

We stood at the top and looked around in 360 degrees at the valley floor below. We could see Truman creek meandering through the meadow where I had seen the coyote jumping its heart out, and even far off to Blacktail Mountain that divided Truman Creek from Flathead Lake far beyond.

Behind us lay a greater range of mountains that stood between us and the greater Flathead Valley. Off to the West of us we could see the mountains leading into the wild Thompson River country. And north, we could see where Truman Creek emptied into Ashley Creek.

It was worth the effort, a site to be long remembered.

The trip back down from Saddle Mountain was only a small fraction of the effort to get to the top. We were back home in what seemed like minutes.

It was another good Montana day.

Thunder and lightning was common place in Truman Creek. On many hot summer days, once the mountain slope would warm up, the hot air would climb skyward and billowing thunder clouds would develop. The thundering sound of the storm seemed to be shaking the very ground we stood on. Rain would burst out of the clouds and the raindrops seemed the size of quarters as they came crashing down soaking everything in sight.

Ron’s horses would bolt at the sound, and mill around nervously in the coral. I wondered why they never seem to get used to the storms that came so often.

Duster, the dog, would head for the garage door, which was usually opened a small amount at the bottom so that he could get in for food and shelter.

Duster was another story. He was the kingpin on the property, although only inches from the ground, he had a strong build. It was like his legs forgot to grow. Duster had medium length hair, colors ranging from brown to gold, to black, to white. He was a pretty dog, with a face you had to love. He didn’t have a mean bone in his body.

Duster had his routines that he had developed over the years of living there. The property was dotted with ground squirrel holes everywhere. We called them, ‘Go Downs,’ or ‘Cascadian Ground Squirrels.’ No matter what they really were called, Duster had their number and they knew it. They
spent a lot of time on the mound of dirt at the hole entrance standing on their hind legs searching for the whereabouts of Duster.

Duster would lay in the shade a lot of the time. Sometimes I would be sitting on the bench on the front porch of the cabin, with my feet propped on the hitching rail I had built to tie the horses to when riders would come up. Duster was seemingly asleep in the shade.

Suddenly, Duster was on his feet and racing as fast as his short legs would take him. First to the squirrel hole by the corner of the cabin as the resident squirrel would dive to safety into the hole, then on to the one by the barn, then across the back of the property he would go, dust flying as he made sweeping turns at full speed. He would run right over the top of a squirrel hole and head for another, and another, and another. Each squirrel would wait until Duster was right on top of them before diving to safety. Duster never slowed his chase until he had forced each squirrel down into their respective holes.

He would then prance proudly up to the driveway. It was at this point that I could hear Ron’s red Ford pickup coming up Truman Creek, and soon he would pull into the driveway where Duster greeted him with a wagging tail that indicated, ‘I cleared the property for you again, boss.’ He had done his job. Ron would be none the wiser to Duster’s routine if no one had told him about it.

Duster never failed to do this as far as I know during the ground squirrel season. It was like a game, and played over and over again, each time he heard the sound of Ron’s Ford truck.

Duster did have his bad days though. He was equally aggressive against the population of Black Bear in Truman Creek. Sometimes he would be gone for days, to return limping and injured. Once, he was found by Ron, torn terribly apart by a bear. Duster would require stitches, and weeks of rest for this one to heal. He was a resilient healer and would seem to overcome even the worst of attacks.

Weeks passed, and it was time for another adventure for Gary and me. We had joined Ron drifting his boat and my canoe down miles and miles of Ashley Creek the previous weekend, catching whatever would dare bite on our baited fishing lines. Ashley Creek was no more than ten to twelve feet wide, meandered slowly through the meadows. Often the meadows would have been fresh cut and bailed for winter hay, and the smell of fresh-cut grass was heavy in the air. I was fond of that smell.

But, today we were taking to the high country that lay north of Kalispell, the Whitefish Divide, which can be seen from all over Flathead Lake country. The divide, made up largely of solid rock, stands thousands of feet above the valley floor, and is prominent.

Gary and I loaded up some snacks for lunch, and our fishing poles. I put an extra pair of socks into my backpack with a few other supplies. We were headed to Whitefish Divide to hike into one of the many high lakes. It was late July now and the weather was nice. The hike would be about two miles in, and then back out. Four miles total, just a nice hike.

We arrived at the trail head, still a little muddy from recent rains, and parked. Soon we were started up the trail. It was a new hike for us and we had to be careful to watch for the trail, as it was not so well marked. Of course, we were also very watchful for Grisly Bear. Grisly sightings were normal for the Divide, and we didn’t want an unexpected, ‘nose to nose,’ encounter with one. There are too many Grisly stories with unhappy endings, especially for the human side of the encounter.

It was an easy hike and we found the lake quite easily, even though the trail was lost from time to time where it wandered through large semi-open spaces. Pine needles would often cover any evidence of the trail. Soon, there was the lake surface glimmering at us through the Fir thickets.

The lake was about four acres in size and there was beautiful meadow grass surrounding it all
around. There were areas of solid rock dispersed liberally around the lake. These rocks made great spots to get out of the wet, muddy areas where the meadow met the lake.

Try as we may, we could not entice a single Trout, nor Grayling, to hit our bait. We cast and cast, but nothing. We weren’t disturbed by the lack of bites, fish bites, that is. There were plenty of mosquito bites that were disturbing. The hike, the lake, the sunshine, all were making the day a success even without fish.

But then, something changed! The sun suddenly vanished and dark shadows began to roll across the landscape. Wind began to blow, and a chill descended upon us. We zipped our jackets tightly and turned our collars up to block some of the cold wind.

Gary worked his fishing line, still trying to get the grayling that we could see jumping after bugs on the surface of the lake.

I looked at the sky and didn’t like what I saw. It was much too dark for my liking. I began gathering my things together. I looked toward Gary again and I could see snow flakes falling between him and me.

I yelled, ‘Gary, we better pack up and head out of here. There’s some bad weather coming in on us.’

But, as fast as we tried to pack and prepare to hike out, it wasn’t soon enough. The ground instantly turned white and the snow began to accumulate. Before we could start for the trail, everything was covered to a depth of an inch or two obliterating any sign of the trail.

Gary wasted no time in responding to my warning and we were soon bucking a sizeable headwind trudging across the meadow heading for the denser stand of timber where we could get some protection from the storm. The snow was nearly horizontal blown by the brisk wind.

We reached the timber and our eyes were searching for the trail. But, the trail just was not visible under the needles, and the new layer of snow. I conjured up all the knowhow that I had gained from my twenty-five years of working in the mountains for the US Forest Service, and made my best estimation which way to go. We wound our way through the trees, heading in what seemed the right direction.

Our hands and feet were getting cold. We were not dressed for freezing weather and we had brought no gloves. I remembered the one pair of extra dry socks I had brought. Most of the high country in this part of Montana could be very wet and often boots and socks would get uncomfortably soaked. Carrying extra dry socks was wise.

I stopped to check Gary’s hands and they were red and cold. I pulled my backpack off and dug for the grey wool socks. I pulled them onto Gary’s hands, stretching the longer length of the sock up and over his jacket sleeve. That would take care of the cold hands, at least for a short while.

We hastily moved over the divide and down through the timber, losing altitude as we went. The lake had been at about 5000 feet elevation, and as we dropped farther and farther down the slope, still heading toward the car, we stumbled onto the trail. There it was!

The snow was sketchy at this lower elevation and the trail was easier to follow. We were soon in the car with the engine running, and the heater on full blast. We were safe, and soon the Whitefish Divide trail head was disappearing behind us as we drove away.

It was a good day, a good day to be out of those mountains. Another Montana adventure goes in the files of Gary’s mind, and in mine. It was a fond memory, even though one that could have been wrought with danger.

Another good Montana day.

That summer ended, and the following spring I married Judith, and we decided to bless Ron,
and Linda, his wife, with a cabin remodel. We prayed what to do with a recent windfall of a few hundred dollars that had come to us, (not much). We had enough to purchase bath fixtures, some lumber and that was about it. So, we began.

We decided to add a 10x12 bedroom to the one side of the cabin, enabling the rest of the cabin to be used as living room and kitchen. We had great fun that summer, Judith, Will, and I doing the remodeling. We did the building with no power tools, using only hand tools. The old fashion way.

Will was Judith’s youngest son. Will and Gary were great friends and spent much time in the woods playing different kinds of games, using only sticks and other homemade weapons.

At one point we were praying for a French Door, and some plywood. We needed the plywood for sheathing, and we wanted a French door for passage from the new bedroom onto the new deck we were building.

We prayed for this need for days, and we eventually said something to Linda about it. She came to us a day or so later to tell us what she had discovered. While walking near Truman Creek on an old overgrown road, she saw a French Door standing against a large Ponderosa Pine tree. There were also some remnants of plywood standing there as well.

Well, this was sure answered prayer, but who did it belong to? Several phone calls later, we located the owner, and he was surprised they were still in usable condition. He appreciated that we had bothered to find him and ask before using them. He gave them to us to use as we pleased.

Finding him, and asking him, was just the right thing to do.

We finally got them up to the cabin in Ron’s red Ford truck. But, sadly we found the French Door was rotten at the bottom. Pushing disappointment aside, I measured the doorway where the door would be fitted, and then measured the French Door. The door was just long enough to have two inches cut off and still be the right size. And all the glass panes were in good shape. Praise the Lord. He had furnished our need perfectly.

At one point when we were putting roofing on the new portion of the cabin, a huge black rain cloud approached. We were concerned that the water would get inside the cabin, and we quickly prayed that Father God would turn the cloud, or just stop the rain. Just as the raindrops began to reach us, the cloud split, moving away from us in both directions. The rain went around us on both sides. Again, praise the Lord for hearing our petitions.

Judith, Will and I stayed in the cabin for the rest of that summer. Truman Creek gave us many blessings, and many nights around Ron and Linda’s’ campfire eating chili dogs and having a great time. Duster was always there, sweeping the ground in search of dropped chili, or at best, a piece of hotdog. Smore’s were usually on the menu too. Of course you know that Smore’s are graham crackers with Hershey chocolate and marshmallow sandwiched between, then heated until the chocolate and marshmallow melts. Yum! We often went to bed at night with our clothes smelling of campfire smoke. But then, campfire smoke seemed to always be in the air in Truman Creek.

These have been mostly idyllic conditions so far in this Truman Creek tale. But, there is a season where the idyllic seem to be evasive.

Some years after these pleasant summer episodes, my wife, Judith, and I house-sat the house at the very end of the county road, where the Truman Creek road runs onto Forest Service land. Only a mile or so from Ron’s place, and the cabin we lived in, we set up housekeeping for the winter.

The house was a large log home, built with the back of the house buried into the steep hillside. A door was built into the gable of the house at the back, whereby firewood could be thrown into a solid concrete wood storage room. This room was accessed from within the house.

The roof was very steep and made of metal to allow the heavy winter snow to slide easily off.
The roof overhang extended nearly to the ground.

Inside the house a large wood stove stood in the center of the room, which was very open. It was a combination of kitchen and living room. There was seating around the wood stove. High above the wood stove was a balcony all around the chimney that ascended to the vaulted ceiling above. From the balcony the several bedrooms could be accessed. The home was very efficiently heated by the stove that could hold four foot long logs.

Jerry and Helen, the property owners had more than sixty acres that they either owned or looked after. Truman Creek ran through the property and was dammed in one spot to create a pond. Jerry had installed an aeration system to help the fish make it through the winter under the thick ice that would cover the pond.

Our job, in exchange for free rent for the six-month long winter, was to clear the ice away from the opening where the aeration system operated. The opening would eventually freeze closed and had to be opened with an axe periodically. Also, we had to measure the water volume flowing through the large culvert under Truman Creek Road. This was done under contract to the Fish and Wildlife Department. We had to fulfill this for Jerry, and keep a log of measurements.

Of course, the colder it was, the more need to check the pond for ice. Sometimes it would be ten degrees below zero, or colder, and I would put on heavy layers of clothes and winter pac boots. I would trudge the several hundred yards to the pond with hard winds blowing snow into my face and pushing my body backwards. I would find the water totally frozen, and much work required to open it again. I did this routine over and over. Returning to huddle over the hot wood stove to warm up was the highlight of this event.

Jerry had a 4x4 Ford Pickup truck, a 1964 model as I recall, on the property. He said we could chain up the front tires and it would be good to haul firewood with as we needed it. I did cut about ten cords of firewood that winter. I would search out dead trees, cut them down, and then cut them into stove length. Once loaded, I hauled them to the house, and throw the pieces into the concrete firewood room to be stacked later.

Often the temperatures would be zero degrees, and less, when I would take the Ford into the forest for wood. We would return with the front wheels churning away through the fifteen inches of snow.

We had plenty of firewood, and it was a good six months. Montana winters can easily last five months, so learning to settle in and be comfortable with each others company is essential. Judith and I had no trouble with that at all. We would often bundle up with many layers of clothes and take long walks on wintery days when the snow was so cold that it would squeak under our shoes. The blue sky overhead, and white winter wonderland everywhere else, was crystal-clear and sparkly.

Most of the time, the county snow plow would keep the road open up to our house, actually turning around in our driveway and heading back to town. We always had to put tire chains on our van before going to town. Once down to the pavement, we could remove them, only to put them back on when we headed back home. It was a routine that was necessary and didn’t seem to bother us at all. It was just what was required to live in Truman Creek.

That was a good winter in Montana.

But time would come when leaving was what we must do. We drove out of Truman Creek never to come back for extended stays again.

I will long remember Truman Creek.

Those were good years in Montana . . .