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## **Beavers Who Bought a Violin**

On the small motorcycle provided me for irrigation, I crisscrossed the ranch we took care of in northeastern Oregon's Blue Mountains, checked the flow of water across the wide meadow, and cut grass, roots, and mud from small ditches with a sharp shovel. I placed what I'd cut as dams to change where water exited ditches and spread across the meadow.

A hundred yards below the west boundary, a larger ditch flows by the edge of dense willows. Beavers dammed the ditch, and water ponded through the willows. I needed the water to flow down the ditch to smaller ditches and irrigate about forty acres of prime hay ground. I removed the beaver dam.

Beavers worked two nights and rebuilt the dam in the four-foot wide, two-a-half-foot-deep ditch. I took the dam out again.

I stopped by three days later. Beavers had rebuilt the dam. A large beaver swam back and forth in the open part of the pond. It wasn't afraid of me or the noisy motorcycle, and that startled me. Beavers are shy animals. Usually, I saw beavers only from at least a hundred feet away.

I said, "Hey, beaver, let's work out an agreement about the water rights here." It dove below the surface and swam away from me, into the part of the pond where willows grew densely.

I pulled my rubber boots up and waded into the ditch. I pulled limbs out of the dam and threw them onto the pile of limbs beside the ditch. I shoveled mud up onto the bank. I kept turning and looking at the pond behind me. The beaver could be in muddy water where I stood knee deep. Beavers aren't aggressive, but it did have a legitimate grievance, and an animal that chews trees down could take a chunk out of my leg.

I reminded myself, that's strictly a human perspective. I removed the dam and got the water flowing down the ditch without seeing the beaver again. When I got the forty acres irrigated, the beavers could have all the water again, and they would have plenty of time to get ready for winter.

Beavers also lived in Camp Creek. Water flowed down Camp Creek, reached beaver dams, and spread across the

meadow. The beavers irrigated the Camp Creek field north of the highway, no work to humans, so hay would grow, but we had problems getting the meadow dried off, late summer, to harvest the hay.

Over years, material had settled from slowed water until beaver ponds and the creek channel between them were shallow through dense willows. When we dried meadows for harvest, I removed dams every morning from Camp Creek because, if beavers worked some day shift or more water came down the creek, beaver ponds and shallow creek channel overflowed, and ground we had dried off got wet again. We couldn't get machinery on wet ground to harvest the hay without getting stuck.

Our second year there, I drove the backhoe up Camp Creek and dug the stream channel deeper. I left beaver lodges alone, but deepened ponds around the houses.

I avoid harassing wildlife, but I didn't apologize about working on Camp Creek. After deepening the creek, when I took out dams to keep the water from overflowing onto the meadow, the beavers still had more than two feet of water left. They made their nightly repairs, and their ponds filled again without overflowing. Both the ranchers' needs and beavers' needs were better met than they were before I dug.

Beavers dam ditches, plug culverts, and dig ditches across hay ground to get water into more area they decide to use. Their work is often a nuisance to irrigators and harvesters. However, they serve an important function in preventing erosion. High, fast spring water channels deep where there are no longer beaver dams to slow and spread the flow of water. High water carries away stream bank.

Beavers build habitat for other wild animals. Their ponds support ducks and other water birds and marsh birds. Lush plant growth around the ponds provides food and cover for many animals.

Along Camp Creek, the beavers helped buy a violin. I hired Juniper, my daughter, to take out dams every morning. "Pull the big limbs out. When you get the big limbs out, then take the pitchfork and work it under a bunch of the smaller limbs and lift them out. Throw them up on the bank, right about there. Then dig the mud out with the shovel.

"They don't have enough water to rebuild every dam every night, so just find the ones they've repaired. You can see the

new part. They won't have had time to build mud onto it yet. Take out what they've rebuilt overnight. That way, they'll still have plenty of water, but it won't overflow onto the meadow."

Hot summer mornings, Juniper crossed the highway, walked up through tall grass, picked up her tools and removed beaver dams.

She stuck with the hot, muddy, smelly work all through dry-off, all through haying season, until the contractor loaded hay bales and hauled them off the field.

By the time snow drifted down onto the beaver ponds, the beavers had water long enough to fill all their ponds and get ready for winter.

Juniper bought a violin and began to learn to play it.

Someday, I thought, and Juniper agreed with me, Juniper would take her violin up Camp Creek and perform for beavers so they could share the beauty they helped provide.

We moved from Whitney Valley before Juniper was ready to play for an audience, but in my imagination, I sometimes see a teen-aged girl playing a violin on the bank of Camp creek at dusk.

Soft musical tones spread out across the valley as darkness envelopes willows growing thick along the creek. Beavers emerge from their lodges, surface, and listen to music while they begin their night's work.