

Irrigating with Guidance from Water

When they hired me to take care of their ranch in Whitney Valley in the Blue Mountains of Northeastern Oregon, I told John and Mike all I knew about the layout of the ranch was a map Tex, the previous caretaker, had drawn in the dirt for me. He had to get on down to a job in Prairie City, and he hadn't had time to show me around.

John said, "We'll come up and show you around when you get settled and get the water started." But they stayed busy running their home ranch, and I started work with what I could figure out about boundaries and irrigation. I repaired fences I knew were mine to repair. I irrigated meadow I was sure was part of the ranch. I worked by myself, and I felt too alone in a strange land.

I turned water into small ditches that ran down the meadow almost to the river. Down the meadow a ways, the ditches were choked with growing grasses and dirt. They obviously hadn't been cleared for years. I wanted water to run down the ditches and irrigate ground farther down the meadow. I would have to do a lot of digging. Late that afternoon, while Laura cooked dinner, Amanda and Juniper came over to the barn to see what I was doing. I sharpened my shovel and hazel hoe and told my daughters about all the digging that lay ahead of me.

The next day, I drove down to Unity for gasoline and my monthly check. John and Mike put the map I'd drawn on their kitchen table and John added to it. "This is the west boundary here. The log crib dam in the river, you been up there, yet? That's on Rico's ranch, but that's our dam, pushes water through the steel headworks for this ditch, waters the whole west side. Boards are piled right there. You'll need them when the river starts dropping.

"You find these springs, along the timber here? You take water there and it crosses under the road, irrigates this part of the mill field. Main thing right now, Rob'll bring steers up end of this week and turn 'em loose in the field south of your house. You'd best get that fence tight before you do any more irrigating. We'll get up there in a few days and fill you in on anything you don't figure out."

I repaired fence surrounding the field south of our house for several days. Water spread across and down the meadow in its own slow, sure way. It eventually spread far enough that it flowed back into the ditches below the choked up parts and ran farther down the meadow. In those ditches, cutting grass, roots, and dirt out of the way was unnecessary, but I wouldn't have

known that if fence work hadn't forced me to wait and see what the water did.

That taught me to slow down, turn water into a dry area and leave it a few days to see what it did before I started improving ditches. Work that appeared to be needed often was unnecessary.

The job of irrigating 700 acres of meadow changed from impossible to quite manageable.

Canada geese nest in Whitney Valley. Snow geese fly into Whitney Valley for a sleep over and into the tall blue sky above steep ridges of conifer forests on their way somewhere else before sunrise. Ducks, cranes, herons, swans, rails, and many species of secretive small birds live in thick, tall-growing meadow and swamp grasses, among myriad wildflowers. Hawks, ravens, eagles and owls fly high above the meadows. Coyotes, deer, elk, badgers, and many other animals live on the meadows or include them in their larger home.

I watched life in the valley. I realized I was an important part of a community of life on the ranch, the man who irrigated meadows and provided habitat for many. I didn't feel lonely again. There were always many members of the community close enough to keep me company and to share habitat with my human family and me.

Mike and John didn't get up to Whitney Valley until I'd irrigated most of the meadow and was working to make best use of summer's diminished water. I'd figured out the boundaries from their sketches on maps I'd drawn and from their descriptions, and I had repaired a lot of fence and knew what fences needed work next.

John and Mike drove into my driveway, and I walked over to their pickup from the pile of split western larch for rock jacks I was loading into my pickup. John asked me, "Did you get the irrigation figured out?"

I said, "Water runs downhill, doesn't it?"

They both laughed. John said, "It sure does."

"Once I was sure of that. I was all right."

We talked and laughed together a while in the summer sunshine.

Then they headed on toward their next stop.

I went back to loading fence materials and hauling them out to the boundaries.