

My Partnership with Nature Brought the Meadow to Life

On April 14, 1979 we moved into the house on the ranch in Whitney Valley, in northeastern Oregon's Blue Mountains. On April 15, I started work as caretaker of the ranch.

I zigzagged the meadows on the small motorcycle provided by the ranch owners and spread water from the Burnt River, Camp Creek, and several springs across about 800 acres of meadow, figuring out how the irrigation worked as I went. I improved ditches with a sharp shovel.

Years before, high water had washed out the dirt dike across the lower Camp Creek field. I hooked a back blade to the tractor and cleared small ditches down the field where I saw traces of the old ones. The sharp corner of the blade curled up long strips of turf. I loaded the turf onto a trailer behind the tractor, hauled it to the top of the field, and placed it to rebuild the dike.

I shoveled dirt that had been cleared from a ditch above the barn years before, hauled it to the field, and added it to the dike I had started to rebuild until it was tall enough to turn water across the top of the field and into the ditches I had cleared with the back blade.

Across the river, I used a shovel to dig ditches into areas that had never been irrigated. I rebuilt other dikes.

The newly irrigated ground became greener and grew more plants native to the area. During the second year, there was hay worth cutting. By the third year, the grasses and forbs had grown lush, and we took a heavy harvest.

When I walked along the ditches on the meadow, I saw mounds of soil packed with dirt molded into what resembled tiny pebbles. These were earthworm castings. The mounds also contained tiny worm eggs, cocoons, and newly-hatched worms too numerous to count. When I turned water down the ditches, the castings and worms washed onto newly irrigated ground. The wet soil gave the worms an environment in which they could thrive.

As worms work their way through soil, they ingest soil and organic material and leave behind castings that contain up to 12 times the plant nutrients in unprocessed soil. The soil they cast is looser and better for growing than untreated soil.

The earthworms were the farmers on the ranch. I kept the ground wet enough for them, and they improved the soil.

Dozens of birds, elk, deer, coyotes, badgers, beavers, bobcats, and other wildlife made good use of the rich growth and moist earth.

By the end of my third irrigation season, Mike and John, the ranch owners, understood I was serious about getting the best crop of hay possible from the ranch. That year, I told them I needed the backhoe and the dump truck to move more dirt than I could move by hand, and they let me take the machines from their home ranch to the Whitney ranch.

I dug big ditches that had accumulated sediment over the years. I reset washed-out culverts and built more dikes with the sediment I dug from ditches. I irrigated more of the ranch.

Earthworms kept working. The hay crop continued to improve.

Several years into that job, when we harvested the hay, John was driving one hay swather as I drove the other. John remarked, "We're cutting a really good crop of hay, aren't we?"

"Yes," I said.

We harvested more than twice as much hay that year as we had harvested my first year. I didn't get paid more for a good crop, but pay wasn't my primary motivation.

I did the job as well as I could because it was the biggest garden I ever took care of. I wanted to see what its potential, fulfilled, would come to. I also loved helping provide a habitat for all the geese, cranes, snipes, ducks, rails, and other wildlife that liked wet, lush meadows.

Water, deep soil, earthworms, and I, and most of all the force that animates life, worked well together on that mountain valley ranch, ostensibly to produce a good crop of hay, but also toward the deeper purpose of improving the habitat for wildlife.

Even deeper than that, we demonstrated how all of us working together brought the meadow fully to life.