Oregonauthor.com
Jon Remmerde
Published in *The Christian Science Monitor*
March 28, 1990 as “Bringing Water Down from the Mountain”
and included in the book, *Quiet People in a Noisy World*
1,562 words

Storms along the Pete Mann Ditch

Summer dried northeastern Oregon. The water in the river fell to a low level. Ranchers couldn’t get enough water into their ditches to irrigate wild hay and alfalfa. As they did every year, they got together a crew of one or two men from each ranch that irrigated from the north fork of the Burnt River and drove up Greenhorn Mountain to start water down the Pete Mann ditch to the river.

Many years ago, miners built the ditch with shovels, picks, rock drills, dynamite, and horse and mule-drawn machinery to bring water around the mountain so they could wash gold from the rock and dirt of the mountain. The miners took out most of the easy-to-get gold. Legislators, responding to growing concern for the preservation of mountains, forests, and streams, outlawed hydraulicing the mountainsides to get gold out. The miners left. Ranchers acquired the rights to mountain water and the use of the ditch to bring the water down to the river to extend their irrigation season.

Not long after the sun rose above Cottonwood Butte, John and Wayne drove into my front yard. I loaded my chainsaw, shovel, and lunch into the back of the pickup, and we headed up the mountain, followed by two other pickups, nine men in all.

Wayne said, “We’ll get soaked by heavy rain before we finish today.”

I looked at the blue mountain sky above us, with no clouds anywhere, and said, “It doesn’t look much like it.”

“It might not look like it now, but we always get a big storm when we go up the mountain to bring water down the ditch.”

And we did.

We split into four crews. Gary and I dismounted from the pickups, unloaded a shovel, a hayfork, and my chainsaw, and we started just above where the ditch entered the river. We traded tools back and forth as we climbed the ditch up the mountain. We forked accumulations of conifer needles and alder leaves out of the ditch, shoveled out dirt and rock slides, and threw out limbs. We cut up trees that had fallen in and threw out the pieces. We filled low spots in the downhill bank with dirt and rocks.

In some places, we climbed a hundred feet up the side of the mountain while we gained only a hundred feet forward. Gigantic granite boulders that had broken away from the solid rock of the mountain lay in the channel, leaving plummeting water to find ways under or around. We climbed to more level ground. Alder bushes grew densely on the downhill bank and extended limbs out over the channel. We stooped along under them, and we cut the lowest growing branches so they wouldn't stop debris floating down the ditch and form a dam that directed water over the bank of the ditch and washed out the bank when we turned water into the ditch.

Clouds filled the sky above us and darkened the day. Lightning danced down from thick clouds and struck the mountain. Thunder rumbled and cracked and roared.

Gary and I finished our section of the ditch, climbed out, and hiked up steep slope. We loaded our tools into the back of the pickup that Wayne had left for us, part way up the mountain, got our lunches from the big toolbox, and climbed into the cab, and the clouds let go of drumming-down, soaking rain. Dry and warm, we ate our lunch while seven other men worked through the driving storm, soaked to the bone. It rained for an hour, and the clouds blew east and left blue sky and sunshine and the freshly-washed smell of the day behind them. We drove farther up the mountain, to out planned meeting place.

The rest of the crew had left the pickup and cleared ditch above where they left it. After the rain, they straggled into our meeting place. Some took their clothes off and wrung out water. Some had already done that and were only damp.

The ditch begins up the mountain at about 7,500 feet and delivers water into the river at about 4,500 feet. The slope most of the ditch crosses is so steep, no one has ever logged it. The dense forest of pine, fir, western larch, aspen and spruce includes bigger trees than are left most places in the west.

Each year I went up, I worked a different section of the ditch. The ditch ran down through magic forest, most of it untouched by man, with no one around for miles but we who cleared the ditch. Golden sun shone through clean mountain air. From some places on the ditch, we looked between the close trees out to thousands of feet of green forest falling away below us, miles of green forests and high meadows standing east across valleys and other mountains of the Blue Mountain range.

Each time I rode up the mountain and worked on the ditch, a heavy storm engulfed the mountain. Every year but the last, I got to the pickup just before the rain started, except for the year two of us took shelter in a miner's cabin, dilapidated but dry,

with plenty of evidence of previous occupation by wood rats and porcupines and birds, until the storm blew east and left sunshine behind it. I began to acquire a reputation of being a dry man.

The last year I worked on the ditch, we unloaded tools and supplies. I filled my back pack. Wayne and Russell watched me top off my load with my tightly rolled nylon rain poncho. "You'd better leave that in the pickup. Its just more to carry."

"You're not afraid to get wet, are you?"

"You guys watch. Later in the day, you'll offer me five times store price for it."

Maybe the mountain knew what I didn't know yet, that I would move on to another job, and it was my last time working the Pete Mann ditch. Whatever the reason, a spectacular storm descended on us.

Wayne and Russell and I worked our way down the ditch, forking and shoveling out debris and cutting what needed cutting. Wayne carried dynamite. We capped and fused sticks of dynamite, and cracking concussions shook a small part of the mountain briefly when we blew rocks that had rolled into the channel into movable fragments.

As if to answer the puny statements we men made with red sticks of dynamite, when we walked the ditch through deep forest, crossing some of the steepest slope, the day turned dark; lightning and thunder shook the mountain; wind howled down through the trees and smelled of rain and lightning-struck rock and wet evergreens. I slipped out of my backpack, sat down on the ditch bank, and got out my poncho.

Wayne said, "It isn't raining yet."

My reply blew away in the wind. I put the poncho on, and rain hit, pouring cold down the mountainside on strong wind. Lightning struck and lit up the darkness under the clouds in startling-bright, blue light, closer than I've ever been to lightning. Thunder roared immediately after the lightning, painful to our ears. Again and again.

I thought of some of the safety rules for lightning storms. Don't get under tall trees. A forest of tall trees surrounded us. Stay out of wet areas. The men above us hadn't yet turned Rattlesnake Creek and Lightning Creek into the channel, but we walked in six inches of running water from springs along the mountain, and the downpour added to the water running around our rubber-booted feet.

We couldn't be anywhere but where we were. I prayed for safety and harmony and trusted we would be kept safe. I gave myself up to the wild beauty of the storm and forgot for the moment any efforts to clear the channel. I had little idea of

passing time. I only knew that a ways down the ditch, later, lightning and thunder rolled away down the mountain. Rain slowed, then quit. The wind calmed to a breeze. Clouds traveled east across a clean sky, and sunshine filtered down through the trees.

Wayne and Russell wrung out their clothes and put them back on. I took off my poncho, rolled it, and put it back in my pack. We worked on down the ditch and met with the other crews at the pickups. By late afternoon, water rushed down the ditch to the river, carrying mud and conifer needles in its first, channel-clearing run. Late the next day, water from the mountain spread across the wild mountain hay meadows I irrigated. I coursed through green growing grasses on the ranch motorcycle and stopped to clear debris that had ridden the water down the mountain from my ditches to avoid damming ditches and out ditch banks.

I've moved on to other jobs on other mountains, but that mountain, with the ditch that brings water part way around its slopes and down to the river, where it slows into meadows of the foothills, with storms that engulfed us as we worked, strongly inhabits my memories.

If I'm ever in the area at the right time, I'd be glad to work with the crew, without pay. I would look to the sky and expect lightning and thunder and hard rain to welcome me back. I'd be sure to take my poncho.