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A Unique, Light Grey Cowboy Hat

Someone who studied that hat might have concluded that it was a product of a hat factory and the Mad Hatter combining efforts. That was close enough to truth to qualify.

I camped out on Coalpit Mountain the summer I bought the hat, almost 25 years ago. I learned to walk again after having been hit by a drunk driver. I needed a hat. Sunshine at 5,000 feet in the clean air of eastern Oregon is intense, and a wide-brimmed hat would shade my face and neck and provide some shelter from eastern Oregon's sudden cloudbursts.

The next time I went to town, I went into a western-wear store. A cowboy hat would be a good starting point, I had decided. It turned out as I had thought it might; there wasn't a hat in the store large enough for me. That was all right. The sweat band inside the hat took up some room, and it would come out, once I was on the privacy of my own mountain. I bought the largest, light-grey, felt cowboy hat without mentioning my plans.

With groceries and my new hat on the back seat of the car I had borrowed for the summer, I drove back up the dusty, gravel road and packed my supplies the last hundred yards up Coalpit Mountain to my camp, with the still too-small hat riding high on my head. I put everything away, ate lunch, and went to work on the hat. I removed the leather sweat band. Without it, the hat fit just right. The hat came with a double crease in the crown. I punched it out smooth. The double crease had been pressed in, so all the lines still showed in the felt.

I soaked the hat overnight in a bucket of water, then smoothed it over the bottom of a gallon jar and let it dry in sunshine. I liked the result, a high, round crown. I put a large dimple in the front of the crown, and I started wearing the hat.

Without a leather sweat band, the soft grey hat was very comfortable. Because there was less adherence between the inside of the hat and my head than there would have been with a leather band, it blew off easily in sudden wind.

The next time I left the mountain and visited my mother, I soaked the hat again and ironed it while it was still damp, to take the remnants of lines from previous designs out and to

stiffen the soft felt somewhat. I bought a long, leather thong, circled the outside of the hat with it, cut holes both sides of the crown and pushed the thong through, rigged a sliding bead, and I had an effective chin strap, to keep the hat from blowing off.

Then a red tailed hawk left a very nice wing feather near camp. As the hawk screamed its hunting scream in the high air above Coalpit Mountain, I said, "Thank you. That's exactly what I need. I treasure this feather."

I cut two holes in the side of the hat's crown and passed the feather's quill in and back out, and I had a feather in my hat. I rolled the left brim up, the right down, and I adjusted the forward brim slightly up or slightly down, depending on where the sun stood or later, when I left the mountain and resumed social existence, depending on what I wanted to communicate about my willingness to communicate or my temporary taciturnity.

Nobody messed with my hat. I didn't have to tell anyone not to mess with it. Apparently, nobody even considered the idea. Until Laura came along. Every time I put the hat down, she picked it up and put it on. I thought that was rather cheeky of her. But then I decided she looked good wearing the hat. Partly because she was cheeky enough to wear the hat and looked good wearing it, we eventually married, and the hat went with us as we progressed through the world. Both of us often wore the hat, though it was too big for Laura, through nine moves.

We owned it still when we lived in Whitney Valley. When we weren't wearing it, we hung it on the wall, on a section of weathered barn wood that someone before us had nailed up as interior wood. The hat blended well with the aged, silver-grey color of the wood and with the ancient, almost forever quality of the old, ramshackle house.

The old, remodeled, unique, light-grey, wide-brimmed, high-crowned cowboy hat took on a slightly numinous quality over the years. It shaded our eyes from intense sunlight and gave our faces and necks protection from driving rain. To some degree, it symbolized the striving toward creative individualism that led me to learn to walk again, that led me through difficult times of finding and adhering to my own direction, largely against the currents of the culture. To some degree, it came to represent the melding of my forces and directions with Laura's.

It fits with the slightly numinous, symbolic quality the hat began to have that neither of us now has any idea what became of it. We owned it and wore it in Whitney. We no longer owned it when we left Whitney Valley. With all powerfully positive numinous symbols, the material manifestation loses importance as the symbolic meaning and the numinous weight are

understood and absorbed. Though we still need shading from intense mountain sunlight and sudden rainstorms, we carry within us the memory and the meanings of the hat.

Sometimes I wonder what became of the hat. Perhaps it passed from material existence, in fire, in a dump, who knows how? Or perhaps even now someone wears it, shielding eyes from sun, sheltering from sudden rain, building meanings for the wearer beyond its mere hatness.