

BAXTER

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"I'm really lucky to have had a dad who was actually building these things," Baxter said.

These are the connections — to a special place and to his father — that prompted Baxter to write "Trails, Bridges & Blizzards" in 2018.

As its title implies, the 148-page book chronicles Reynold's Forest Service career. But it's also a memoir of Farel's experiences on the same trails and at the same peaks, passes and lakes where his father worked and played.

Baxter was able to assemble this collection of anecdotes largely because of his affinity, dating to his boyhood, of keeping every scrap of paper that might later be of interest.

When he was 4 or 5 his mother, Oreta, brought him a box of documents related to family history.

Baxter not only saved the box. He added to its burden.

"I started saving everything that came along," he said during a recent interview in the front room of his Baker City home. "I always thought I would put all that stuff together some day and write a book."

He ended up writing more than one.

Baxter has also compiled an extensive family history, as well as a collection of short stories of his experiences in the mountains, titled "The Worthy Hat."

His master's thesis at the University of Oregon examines settlements of North-eastern Oregon.

But as useful as the documents in that old box turned out to be, much of "Trails, Bridges & Blizzards" derives from a type of history as old as verbal language.

The book might not have been written but for Baxter, as a boy, badgering his father on dozens of evenings in front of the family's fireplace.

Not that Reynolds was bothered by his son's interest in his work.

"Every day when he came home from work I was all over him, asking about what he had done," Baxter said. "He'd fill me in and I'd take out my maps to follow along where he had been."

(In the author's note for "Trails, Bridges & Blizzards," Baxter wrote that he could interpret contour maps, which show the lay of the land, before he could read.)



S. John Collins/Baker City Herald

Farel Baxter attributes his affinity for writing to his mother, Oreta, who he said had a gift for writing.

"I remember these things vividly," he said. "I guess I was supposed to."

As a boy Baxter was enthralled not only by his father's work in the Eagle Cap Wilderness, but also by tales from the pack trips his father helped lead, guiding groups of Boy Scouts on 50-mile, multi-day treks through one of the most scenic places in the West.

The first of these was in July 1948 and Baxter, just 5, was too young to go along.

That trip, which included 20 youths and seven adults, also inspired the "Blizzards" part of Baxter's book title. His dad's group endured a midsummer snowstorm while camped at Swamp Lake.

Several years later Baxter started accompanying his dad on summer trips into the wilderness.

"My cousin Don Baxter and I were packing into the wilderness area by ourselves by our 13th summer," he writes in "Trails, Bridges & Blizzards."

More than half a century later Baxter still relishes every journey into those mountains.

He describes many backpacking adventures in his book, including one in 2010 when he, along with several companions, retraced much of the route of the 1948, blizzard-marred excursion his father guided. As his father had, Baxter planned his trip

for late July.

Baxter's group avoided a blizzard, but their trip wasn't without inclement weather. They had to hunker down on the 8,400-foot plateau above Swamp Lake while a thunderstorm pelted them with rain, and lightning bolts illuminated the gray sky.

"While we dallied here for a bit I reflected again upon the passing here of my father's group in 1948," Baxter wrote. "It was at about this point that they began to get snowed on. With the warm temperatures we were experiencing there was no danger we would get snow and I was really thankful for that."

On July 29, 2010, Baxter's group, which like his father's included several teenagers, sheltered from a torrential downpour at Long Lake, the same place, and the same date, where his father had camped in 1948 while 6 inches of snow fell.

"We too found ourselves at the mercy of nature and made the best of our situation," Baxter wrote.

One major difference between the two trips, he said — besides the passage of 62 years — is that the 1948 group both rode horses and relied on the animals to haul their gear and food. The latter category, according to a narration by Reynolds that's featured in "Trails, Bridges & Blizzards," included "enough pancake flour to support at



Photo courtesy of Farel Baxter

This photo was taken in 1957 while Farel Baxter's father, Reynolds, was building a bridge over Eagle Creek north of Boulder Park. The logs are heavy green tamaracks, Farel Baxter wrote in his book, "Trails, Bridges & Blizzards."

"The wilderness teaches you lessons whether you want to learn them or not."

— Farel Baxter

least one of our local farmers for a year."

But in 2010 Baxter's group hiked, and they carried their stuff in backpacks.

In the book Baxter writes that he usually had access to a horse to pack some items during wilderness trips when he was a teenager, but he hiked with a pack strapped to his back.

But only in name did those contraptions have anything in common with modern packs constructed of light but sturdy alloys and fabrics.

"As teenagers our backpacks were made out of boards and cord, with heavy canvas sacks," Baxter said with a rueful chuckle that suggests his shoulders don't think the memories of their old burdens are especially amusing. "They were the best we had."

And it wasn't only the packs that pressed heavily on Baxter and his buddies — so did the food they stuffed inside.

"We took cans of peas," he said, remembering in particular one trip when his mother insisted that he haul at least nine cans of peas.

The little green morsels were at least tasty — "we ate them all," Baxter said — but modern dehydrated, freeze-dried meals, which weigh a small fraction of canned vegetables, are much less taxing.

"Those were heavy packs and we were scrawny kids," he said. "We were tougher than we thought we were."

Decades later, Baxter remains dedicated to staying fit. As he sits in a recliner he

looks like nothing so much as a venerable alpinist, thin and wiry, the sort of man you might find nursing a beer in an Alpine hut after completing a tough route on Mont Blanc, a coil of rope slung over one shoulder.

A humidifier puffs moisture into the air in Baxter's living room to compensate for the woodstove that chases the chill on this bright morning in mid-October.

The stove is burning a few of the tens of thousands of chunks that Baxter stacks every year. Retired from teaching, he spends much of his time — when he's not hiking — cutting and selling firewood. He puts up about 70 cords per year.

The combination of tromping around the Eagle Cap Wilderness and bringing in wood keeps Baxter in fine fettle.

It also helps him control his diabetes.

"I do it because I can, and it's fun," he said of his wood-cutting.

Although the Eagle Cap Wilderness figures prominently in many of Baxter's own memories, some of his favorite stories aren't really about him, or his father, but about youngsters he introduced to the mountains on long backpacking trips much like those his father guided.

"It's life-changing, I think," Baxter said of these treks.

He talks of youths who kept hiking despite nasty blisters that left their feet bloody, of older kids who helped their younger companions, of the musical laughter

How To Get A Copy Of Farel Baxter's Book

Baxter can be reached at 541-519-8640, or by mail at 3095 B St., Baker City, OR 97814. He said he also plans to make copies available at Betty's Books in Baker City.

around many campfires.

"Those kids still talk about those trips," Baxter said. "And I don't forget. I think kids are hungry for that experience, if they just get a little taste."

He remembers most vividly a teenage boy from Idaho who lived on the streets with his mother. This boy, Baxter said, arrived for his first backpacking trip with a "chip on his shoulder."

"He was growling at people, very sullen," Baxter said. "Not a very happy boy."

But the first night in camp, Baxter managed to coax a laugh from the boy.

The next morning the boy smiled — "he started feeling good," Baxter said.

By the time the trip ended six days later, "that kid was 100% changed," Baxter said. "It was the most amazing change I've ever seen."

Baxter said he never did find out how the boy fared when he returned to Idaho.

But he wouldn't be surprised if that week in the Eagle Cap Wilderness had a lasting, and profound, effect on the teenager's troubled life.

Baxter has seen it happen.

"The wilderness teaches you lessons whether you want to learn them or not," he said.

SHARP

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So how many times should you stroke the knife on each side? It doesn't matter but everyone does three times so just do that or you'll freak everyone out. You will tend to have a smaller angle as you get into the curvature of the blade. You may be starting out on the hilt at 25 degrees but as you get into the curvature of the blade you're at 15 degrees. You want to use the same angle all the way down the blade. To eliminate ending up with multiple angles I recommend lifting your elbow when you start into the curvature. Watch the YouTube video (the link is at the end of the column) to comprehend what I mean.

If the edge is really dinged up and mushroomed, I'll slide the blade backward the first four revolutions to get the metal lined back up and then I'll start cutting into the stone.

Now, the million-dollar

question. How do I obtain the correct angle? Good question. Here's a trick that will help you. Get a semi-fine tip Sharpie. Mark along the edge of the knife. Now grind on each side once and look at the edge. If only half of the mark is gone, that tells you that you need to drop the spine down a little. If the mark is gone — perfect! If there are grind marks on hollow grind above the edge, then you have the knife laid too far down.

More than likely you will find out that you are not consistent at all. You will start out OK near the hilt, then by the end of the tip all of the mark is gone plus some. And in between there will be spots that you somehow totally missed. The mark will tell you what you are doing right or wrong.

To put on a finer edge, after using a diamond stone advance to an Arkansas stone. When using an Arkansas stone apply a few drops of honing oil before you start. Use the same procedures as

you employed on the diamond stone until the edge feels smooth. When it feels smooth as glass, then test it by slicing a piece of paper.

Most boning knives and fish fillet knives are going to be made of softer metal. So to sharpen one of them you'll want to start right off on an Arkansas stone. Then to put a wicked edge on them you'll need to progress to a smooth steel.

With practice you can become proficient at sharpening. Use good quality knives. If you try to learn on a cheap knife from China, you'll get frustrated and lose hope. I've had good luck with Knives of Alaska and Diamond Blades. The metal is hard so they will hold an edge but not so hard that they cannot be easily sharpened.

PRO TIPS

- Don't let your knife get super dull and it will be easier to put an edge back on it.
- To clean your diamond

stone, use warm soapy water and a rag.

I have an article on

Amazon Kindle titled "Knife Sharpening" that goes into deeper detail.

Knife-sharpening video on YouTube. Go to RonSpomerOutdoors.

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