Hundreds of years of harvest

MATT WOOD
FROM THE TRACTOR

For the past couple of weeks, my son Willie and I have been harvesting wheat on land we farm in the Helix area, something my family has done in one form or another for approximately 130 years.

Some things have not changed significantly in that time, but many other aspects of modern farming would be unrecognizable to my great-great-grandfather, who came to northern Umatilla County in the 1880s to help construct the rail line that connected the newly platted town of Helix to the line near present-day Wallula via tracks laid through Vansycle Canyon.

After the construction project was complete, he decided to stay in the area and homesteaded land in 1886 that is still owned by my aunt and uncle. The railroad was a vital part of the local economy. It provided a means by which agricultural products (such as grain and livestock) could be exported to market and, conversely, was a means by which imported goods (such as hardware and lumber, farm equipment, housewares and thousands of other items) could be brought to the area.

The rail lines were also the principal means by which people traveled any distance more than a few miles. The automobile, or at least a widely available practical version, was still decades in the future and the roads at the time were mostly wagon trails that were used by the local residents to pull conveyances that relied upon real horsepower.

In our modern petroleum-powered economy it is difficult to fathom the tremendous amount of work that was accomplished through the cooperative effort of man and beast. Horses pulled barges on the Erie Canal. Draymen, and more importantly their hardworking four-legged partners, transported goods in cities that ranged from heavy materials used in construction of early skyscrapers to beer from breweries. Before the Industrial Age came to the Pacific Northwest, an entire Native culture and trading network relied upon the animal whose vernacular moniker is synonymous with the tribe who so adroitly employed them.

I wonder if either of us could perform the required tasks of the other if transported to the future or to the past.

Closer to home for me, my family relied upon horses (or in later years, mules) to power all of the tillage, seeding and harvesting equipment used on our farm for two generations. Even for someone so ostensibly stuck in the past as I am, it's hard to imagine breaking into a field of prairie sod with a single 12- or 14-inch plow behind a team and at the end of a good day perhaps an acre and a quarter of land had been turned. With our 50-year-old tractor and rod-weeders, we can work up to a quarter-section (160 acres) a day and yet be scoffed at by neighbors spraying chemical fallow with a GPS-equipped sprayer at a rate of 800 acres or more in a good day in the spring.

One aspect of harvesting that would still strike a familiar chord with great-grandad is the approximate width of the cutting apparatus (header) on Willie's combined harvester-thresher (combine). Unlike most of our neighbors, who have expanded to 30 feet and more, we are still at a 20-foot swath — just like our family's outfit from the 1930s. Somewhat similarly to grandpa, we can harvest about 40 acres a day with the machine but can now accomplish the task with a crew of two opposed to four or five back then. We also have an air-conditioned cab and power steering; they had goggles, a neckerchief, the top button fastened, and did not need to lift weights at the gym to have powerful biceps.

Grandpa's outfit from the late 1930s was pulled not by the great 24-32 head (or more) teams as had been practiced for a couple of decades. Instead, it was hitched to a steel-tracked crawler tractor. Our family switched to a tractor in 1934 and, just for good measure and remembrance, we still own an operable 1933 model that starts with a hand-crank.

Also in the 1930s, a shift occurred in the method of handling grain. For years, grain was sacked either at the stationary thresher or on the combine on a platform next to a "sack chute" (we have one of those in the barn) that would hold five or six sacks of grain each weighing 120-140 lbs. Sack piles around the field were then retrieved by wagons or, later, trucks.

Bulk handling of grain eliminated the job of sack jig and sewer, but created a need for wheat truck drivers and scale house operators at giant elevators where grain could be stored and shipped to market by truck, train and eventually barge. Today we haul grain to giant "ground piles" that will be tarped before winter and shipped as the market dictates.

Especially when driving the truck without a radio, I frequently ponder the similarities and differences between my "modern" (we are outdated by about one generation) farming operation and that of my ancestors.

I wonder if either of us could successfully perform the required tasks of the other if transported ahead to the future or back to the past. I know my great-grandfathers would have liked to have had access to the crop insurance I can buy and I wish I had access to the old-growth, straight-grained lumber they used to build their barns. For now, none of that matters. I need to grease the combine and harvest another 500 acres.

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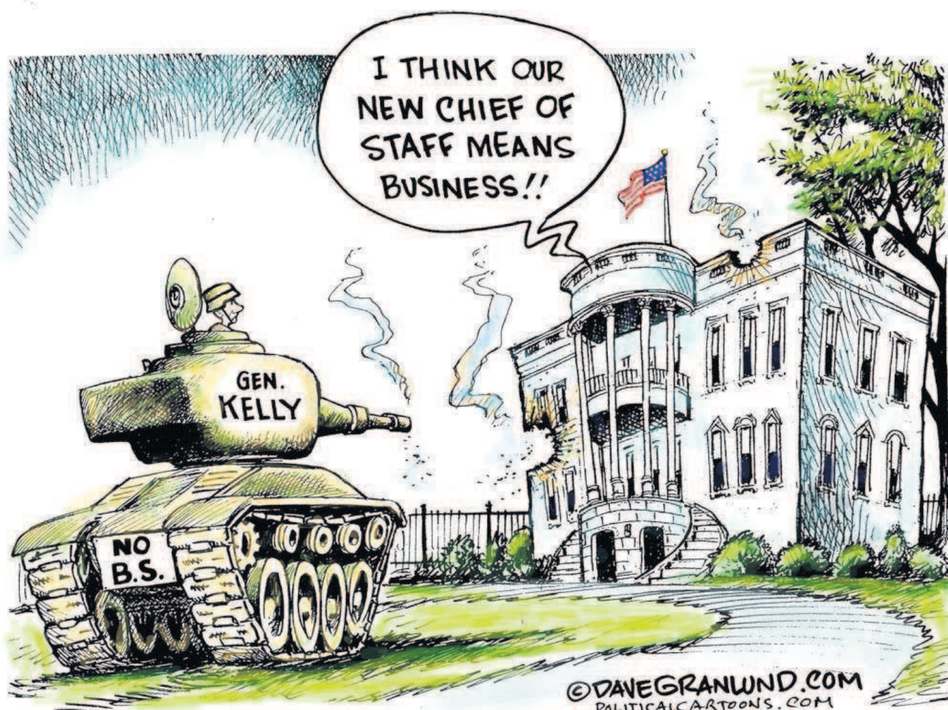
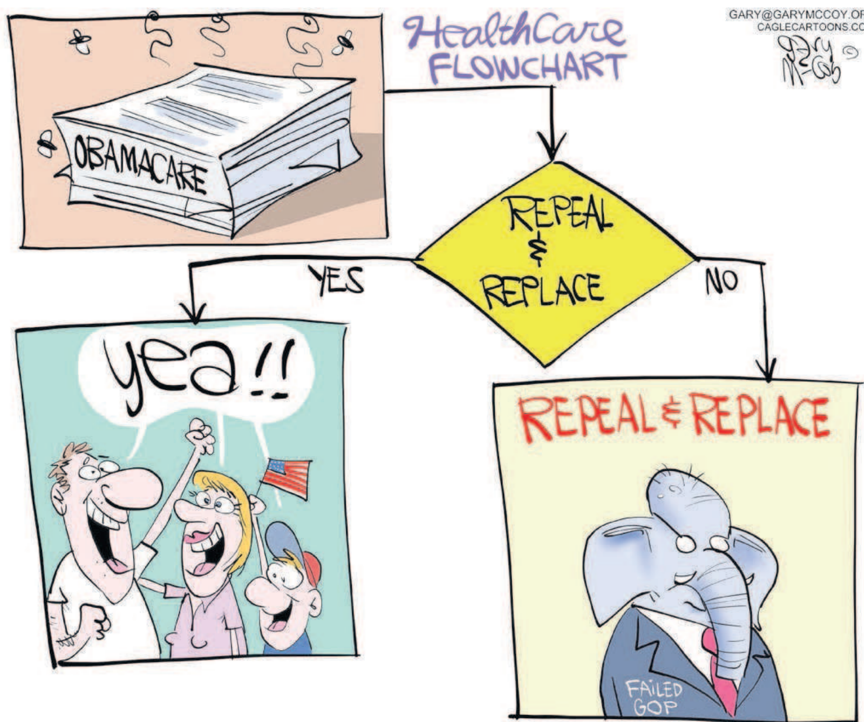
Matt Wood is his son's hired man and his daughter's biggest fan. He lives on a farm near Helix, where he collects antiques and friends.





Choosing how to go

ROB PUDIM
Comment

The West seems to have a different attitude about life and death than other parts of the country. Of the five states that allow medical aid in dying, known as MAID, four are west of the Mississippi — Oregon, Washington, California and Colorado. The fifth is Vermont and, although it is not a state, the District of Columbia.

Other states have come close. Montana courts have found that there is no public policy against assisted death, and New Mexico briefly allowed it in 2014 before overturning it in 2015. In Arizona, the Legislature will not let the bill out of committee even though most Arizonans are said to favor it.

Most Westerners, I think, believe that allowing people to obtain medical aid to die is a simply a matter of choice that should not be a decision made by the state, a state legislature, a medical association, a religion or any other person.

It's your life. It's your death.

Maybe it has to do with the independence of people or geographical distance from each other, or the knowledge that we sometimes have to depend on only ourselves. A lot of us believe that each person has the right to decide about our life or death, and whether life is worth living when a condition is incurable and the future filled with pain.

Granted, we all have the ability to commit suicide but generally that choice is not pleasant — jumping off Golden Gate Bridge, guns, death by police or an auto crash.

If you assist or encourage someone — and there was a recent controversial case of a young woman encouraging a boyfriend to commit suicide — you can be charged with being an accessory to murder. Medical help in dying, however, is neither suicide nor murder, and most cases of a loved one helping another to die are dismissed.

In 1996, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled: "Those who believe strongly that death must come without physician assistance should be allowed to follow that creed, whether they be doctors or patients. But they should not be free to force their views, their religious convictions or their philosophies on all other members of a democratic society, nor should they be free to compel those whose values differ from theirs to die a painful, protracted and agonizing death."

Briefly stated, it's your life. It's your death. It ought to be a personal and private choice.

A dear friend I have known for more than 50 years has an incurable, progressive disease that will kill him. He is educated, alert and rational, and right now feels no pain or anxiety because a hospice manages his discomfort. Yet he does not like being tethered to an oxygen line while he slowly suffocates. He wants his life to be over but is too incapacitated to do anything about it. At one point he asked me if I could get him a gun.

According to the Colorado referendum, two physicians have to agree that a person's medical condition is incurable and the drug cocktail has to be self-administered. It sounds simple.

Nothing is simple.

What if your doctor has religious beliefs that preclude assisted dying, or has a literal interpretation of the Hippocratic Oath, which states that before anything else, do no harm? What if your doctor's beliefs require you to live out whatever life has dealt you? What if the pharmacist thinks the same way and refuses to issue the prescription?

What if the hospital does not have the correct protocols in place or the legal boilerplate necessary to allow a patient to die by choice? What if the hospital is run by a church? What if you are physically unable to take the drugs you need to end your life?

According to Compassion & Choices, a national organization that pushed medical aid in dying in Colorado, 10 prescriptions have been filled so far, but it is not known how many have ever been used. Advocates say about 1 in 3 patients who receive the drugs fails to take them. They may have just wanted the option available.

My old and dear friend has been facing this. He could move to another state and establish residency, which could take at least six months, or is it a year? He does not have the time or ability to do this, though paradoxically he has a lot of time — to lie in bed and think about his future.

In Colorado, lawmakers put $44,000 into the budget in May to help doctors with patients who might ask about receiving aid in dying. Republican State Sen. Kevin Lundberg says tax payers should not support the practice: "This is not the job of a doctor, it's certainly not the job of government."

Well, whose job is it when you're stuck in a bed with tubes and wires attached to you? And what if this happened to you?

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Rob Pudim is a contributor to High Country News. He says his friend died while in hospice care on June 16.

Celebrate the unlovely fish

BEN GOLDFARB
Comment

Westerners, we've got a problem. A trout problem. For decades, anglers have fetishized these silvery stream-dwellers, maniacally pursuing rainbows, browns and brookies to the neglect of other underwater life.

Every year, obliging fish managers pump America's waterways full of millions of hatchery-born trout, diluting gene pools and overwhelming native species. We fishermen consider ourselves enlightened stewards, but our trout myopia reveals our true self-centeredness. And let's not even get started on bass.

Fortunately, there are plenty more fish in the sea — to say nothing of rivers, creeks and lakes. For anyone seeking a deeper understanding of what lies beneath the surface of Western waterways, "Beautifully Grotesque Fish of the American West" offers a lively primer to the region's aquatic biodiversity. Over the course of 11 chapters, Mark Spitzer, a writing professor at the University of Central Arkansas and a certified angling addict, travels the country seeking the kinds of experiences that you're unlikely to find valorized in the pages of Field & Stream: ice-fishing for burbot in Utah's Flaming Gorge Reservoir, bounty-hunting for pikeminnow in the Columbia River, snagging paddlefish in Missouri.

Spitzer's shtick is to love the unlovely, to venerate the homely stalwarts that make up in resilience what they lack in conventional beauty. This is a writer whose master's thesis was a novel about a "misunderstood, man-eating catfish," and whose first two nonfiction books profiled the alligator gar, a gargantuan primitive fish with a crocodilian smile. You might think that a lifetime of scribbling about gruesome freshwater monsters would have scratched that particular itch, yet Spitzer's ardor for the ugly is powerful.

He rhapsodizes about the razorback sucker, a "quasi-Quasimodo with an elongated horsey head"; the paddlefish and its "crazy flat spatulated nose"; and the way American eels swim together in "spermy formation." Granted, not all the fish he targets truly deserve the grotesque label: You get the distinct feeling that he includes a chapter on muskellunge — a sleek, tiger-striped predator that's gorgeous by anyone's definition — simply because he yearns to catch one.

Just as Spitzer revels in homely fish, he delights in less-than-scenic landscapes, especially ones dominated by human activity. He does his best fishing in reservoirs, below dams, and along what he dubs the Industrial Edge, "ecotones of smokestacks and cinderblocks and rusty pipes and climbing ivies" where the built and natural environments collide. On Oregon's Willamette River, across the channel from railroad tracks and homeless camps, he lands dinosaur-like sturgeon, ancient fish that were swimming Western rivers when hominids were a glint in evolution's eye.

Spitzer has a soft spot for invasive species, too. After netting non-native carp, he says, perhaps optimistically, "that we can strike a balance with non-indigenous species and incorporate them into our cultures." Slathered in teriyaki and curry paste, he discovers carp and hideous snakehead fish aren't half bad. If you can't beat 'em, eat 'em.

Occasionally, the author turns the lens inward, to the grotesqueries of his own life. Spitzer makes passing reference to an acrimonious divorce, the death of his mother, and, finally, a new partner. In one passage, landing 6-foot-long gar in Texas soothes his bitterness about the dissolution of his marriage, providing a redemptive connection to "that youthful capacity for wondering and marveling at what this world has to offer." During such moments, you can glimpse the contours of a more personal — and emotionally richer — book lurking just beneath the surface: a fisherman's version of "Wild," with, say, the Missouri River standing in for the Pacific Crest Trail. Spitzer angles half the rivers in the West, but he never plumbs his own depths.

What "Beautifully Grotesque Fish" lacks in soul-searching, though, it makes up in soul: It's a paean to the ignored, an homage to the uncelebrated. It's about embracing the nature we have, whatever it looks like, wherever it swims. There's also plenty of technical advice for fishermen hoping to duplicate Spitzer's quirky exploits: The best lure on which to catch pikeminnow is "either a rubber tube or a grub."

In the end, Spitzer's book offers a fishing manifesto for a human-dominated planet. May trout have company in our hearts, and on our lines.

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Ben Goldfarb is a contributor to High Country News.