

My Days on the Gehrke Homestead

(Note that Harry Beerman lived with his mom and step-dad near Niagara Creek about 2 miles off of Upper Nestucca River Road about 11 miles east of Beaver, Oregon. He attended Silver Falls School which was about 13 miles east of Beaver.) Harry typed this story in 2002 and sent it to me, Dean Bones, to add to information he had already provided for the Heritage Project at Nestucca Valley Middle School. I typed this finally in the fall of 2015.

Also, Harry Beerman sold a small piece of the homestead property that had been deeded to him to his stepdad's brother, Al Gerke. Al built a cabin on that property. Al was a customer at my dad's Shell gas station in Beaver at the corner of Hwy 101 and Blaine Road. I remember that my dad was concerned about Al once in the early 1960s as Al hadn't been to the station in awhile. So I rode with my dad up Upper Nestucca River Road turning to the right at Niagara Creek and then taking the very long about 2 mile drive in to Al Gerke's cabin. Al was quite old then, but was fine. I don't remember now if he had been sick or why he hadn't been out and about. But, of course, he had no phone or electricity. As I look back on that experience I am grateful for the neighbor checking on neighbor mentality that my dad modeled for me. db)

It was the Great Depression of 1928 that caused my mother, my sister, my step-father and myself to find ourselves living on a remote homestead on the upper reaches of the Nestucca River in Tillamook County, Oregon. In 1928 I was only ten years of age.

My mother's name was Edna Gehrke, my sister's name was Gladys Beerman, and my stepfather's name was Emil Gehrke. My mother divorced my father when I was very young, and I do not remember back to the days when they were together. Emil, according to my first recollections, had worked in a Seattle, Washington, steel foundry in south Seattle. He was handicapped as a result of polio before he met my mother and they became married. The polio had left him with a badly deformed leg that made walking difficult for him. Emil and my mother acquired and operated a steam-powered laundry business in the North Park suburb of Seattle adjacent to old highway 99 northward out of Seattle that at the time was paved with bricks. The Great Depression of 1928 forced them into bankruptcy.

At the time, I was too young to begin to understand the situation that confronted our little family in 1928 and the economic hardships that were involved. I was just not involved or concerned with these weighty matters. I am sure that my mother and step-father agonized for weeks and months, maybe years, as they searched for a solution to the problems they then faced. In the end, it was decided that they would become "homesteaders," and, ultimately, the place would be in Tillamook County, Oregon. Only as an adult can I begin to understand the full magnitude of the situation that they faced.

Considering that my step-father was a semi-cripple and walked with great difficulty, I find it amazing that he was able to find the homestead property in the first place and how he was able to travel to and from Tillamook to conduct his business and to buy his needed supplies and carry them the two miles on foot from the nearest road to the homestead property. He did not and could not drive, and he had problems even walking.

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He did manage to find a place of remarkable beauty probably then available only because of its remoteness. It was approximately two miles from the nearest road and on the wrong side of the Nestucca River with only a footbridge suspended by cables that swayed alarmingly when used to cross the river. The Forest Service had built this bridge sometime earlier to access the area south of the river. My step-father had to carry everything he needed across this footbridge, then walk the two miles to the property using an old Indian trail up the valley of Niagara Creek. He then managed to build a cabin on the property, largely built from small native poles for framing and covered by hand-split shakes. How he did this and how he lived while doing this I can only guess.

Anyway, when Emil let us know that he was ready for us, my mother, my sister and I proceeded to join him on the new homestead. The cabin had a full-sized wood-burning kitchen stove that must have been a real problem transporting to the property. Anyway, when Emil thought everything was ready for us, he sent for us. Beulah Creek flowed into Niagara Creek on our property, and since it was closest to our cabin, it served as our source of water. We hand-carried all needed water up to the cabin. An outhouse served as our toilet, the creek was my normal bathtub, and electricity never graced the premises. Emil undertook tasks in this undertaking that few could understand, and that fewer still would be willing to undertake. As an adult I can now understand and appreciate the difficulties he faced and can give him, belatedly, the credit he deserves.

I recall that this 640 acre homestead property is located in Section 15, Township 4 south, Range 8 west in Tillamook County at the confluence of Beulah Creek and Niagara Creek, with old Mount Hebo to be seen in the background.

This country was truly a fine place for a young lad like myself to grow up in. There was, literally, thousands of square miles behind us that was mine alone to explore and hunt as I wished. Even though I was still very young, I became, by default, the family hunter. I had my own rifle which I usually carried when in the "back-country" and the game I was able to shoot provided the fresh meat that graced our table. Nothing went to waste. Mother canned everything that was not immediately eaten. I well remember one fine summer day that I and my little dog "Tippy" decided to go exploring the back-country. On this day we went way back, further than ever before, and, of course, I carried my rifle. I had some sandwiches for my lunch, and it was well into the afternoon when we turned about and started home. We were still further away from home than I thought when I saw a nice big buck which I shot.

I went through the appropriate routines to make him ready to carry out only to find that he was too big and heavy to get him off the ground, let alone carry him. So I cut him in two and tried again. This worked, but each half was still all I could manage, so I had to carry each half for a ways then go back for the other half. Anyway, darkness caught us before we could get home that day. We did get back to a trail with which I was familiar, and there we spent the night. I built a small fire to keep warm. I always carried matches in the event of need. When dawn broke, we walked home without the meat. I saddled

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the pony and went back for the deer. My mother was not overly concerned about my spending the night in the woods. She said she thought I could take care of myself.

While I can assure you that life was ideal for me I also know that my mother and sister would declare the life to be something of a hardship. Nothing in those days would make life easy for a woman on that homestead.

In time we were able to buy a pony, and that made it much easier for Emil to get about. We also built up a flock of chickens, acquired a cow and some young stock, and we also acquired several milk goats. During the summer months, we found trees that produced Cascara bark, which we peeled, dried, bagged, took to town and sold to supplement our meager income. We also built a homemade barn out of local poles and hand-split shakes. It was my job, when not going to school, to find and bring in the cows for milking at night. They traveled widely during the day foraging on wild feed, and I had to learn some skills to track them down because they could travel in many directions each day. I also milked our two goats both morning and night.

In the fall of 1931 I enrolled and attended the little one-room school, Silver Falls School, that was located some two miles or so further up-river from the place where we left our car down at the road where we crossed the Nestucca. I was in the eighth grade at the time. A private automobile was used as a school bus to transport us to school. I walked the two miles of trail twice a day to and from the road. Some of the kids rode to school on horseback, and the horses had a shed on the school property where they were kept during school hours.

A single young female teacher taught all 8 grades in our one-room school, and I have come to believe that she had her hands full. She lived with the Bohna family a short walk from the school, and she must have been one busy lady. When school started each day, the school was already warm, and our teacher must have arrived early to build the fire in the old wood-burning stove that warmed the place. I can't begin to imagine what other duties she faced in managing our little school.

I remember our young female teacher as pleasant and a very nice lady. I do not recall that she had any problems maintaining discipline in our school. I would like to meet her again to thank her for her dedication to duty that could not have been easy for her, but that, of course, is not going to happen. She, very probably, is long gone.

I became, over time, rather adept at traveling the trail to the homestead during the hours of darkness (because of necessity) without the aid of flashlights or lanterns. It was easiest to look up at the sky on a very dark night because tree trunks could usually be seen vaguely against the lighter sky thereby providing a reference to one's progress. At one point along the trail we came to a small creek that we could jump across in daylight very easily, but at night it was necessary to carefully listen to the sounds the creek made as it flowed past and gauge when it was time to jump. I remember one dark night when I misjudged the distance and landed in the creek, and I had to walk the rest of the way home with very wet, wet feet.

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Some recalled events -

We undertook to do a bit of trapping in those days. We had game of all kinds in the area. We were most interested in coon and mink whose pelts were worth money. We had steel traps and box traps out in strategic locations in an attempt to capture some of these animals. One day as I was checking our trap line I found one of our box traps had caught a civet cat, a small skunk common to the area, and I decided to carry this prize home under my arm. Well, suffice it to say that a skunk (or civet cat) is not happy when handled in this manner. Anyway, when I appeared at our cabin, my mother would not let me in. She made me head for the creek for a bath, and my clothes stayed outside. That was on very smelly day.

On another nice sunny summer day, Emil and I decided to go hunting together, so we spent the preceding night in the woods so we could move higher in the early morning where we were sure the deer would be feeding at first light when daylight followed a very dark night. This worked out just as we planned, and Emil spotted and shot at a moving deer. But he was not sure if it had been hit or not. It was last seen leaping over a sizable embankment, and it fell my lot to check it out. I was unable to find any sign or evidence of the deer, but after a bit I decided to bark like a dog to see what might happen. I heard noises that could have been made by a wounded deer traveling through the brush, so I followed the sound. When the noise stopped, I would bark again like a dog then follow the resulting sounds. Eventually I found myself in a small wooded glen that was a small basin. Every way ahead was up except the way behind me. This glen was in deep shade, and giant fern clumps were everywhere. I paused to study the best route to move up to the higher level, and I was very much surprised to see the head of a bear looking at me over a clump of giant fern.

Instinctively I brought up my rifle and fired a quick shot at the bear's head, and that made the bear rear up on his hind legs obviously very mad. I discovered later that my first shot made in haste had burned a furrow at the very top of his head and between his ears, never touching any bone. anyway, he was VERY BIG and VERY MAD. On his hind legs he presented a big target, and I shot him again. Then he stated down the hill heading directly toward me. He was not very far away even when first seen, and he presented an ever larger target each second as he came down the hill. I shot him again as he came down the hill. He seemingly was already dead when he would up very close to my feet. By now I was beginning to realize that I had embarked on a dangerous enterprise, and I was scared. I knew very well that a big old bear was not easy to kill and that I had taken some risk in this event. I shot the bear again as he lay at my feet. My gun was then empty (it had a three-shot clip, and with one round in the barrel, it held a total of four rounds.) so I reloaded while I speculated on what I had just done. I had a strong feeling that I should make certain that the bear was really and truly dead. After I had reloaded, with the hammer back and my finger on the trigger, I poked that old bear in the face to see if any part of him moved even a little bit. And, if he had, I was prepared to shoot him again. My bear was a big old male, and much of the day was used to get him home. He required two pony trips to carry him home.

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We tried to eat his meat, but it was so strong and inedible that we gave up. We tacked his hide up on a wall in the barn and were surprised to find how difficult it was to drive a nail through the hide. In retrospect I believe that I would choose NOT to repeat that experience. I was probably about thirteen at the time.

Another event that comes to mind occurred some years after I had gone to work in the woods near Tillamook working as a lumberjack. It was a Saturday, and I drove out to the homestead to visit. There I learned that something, a cougar we were sure, had killed on the young heifers. A plan was formulated that would involve spending the night in the woods nearby in the hope that we might encounter the cougar and kill him. A young man who was also a guest at the homestead agreed to go with me. We took rifles, food, and some other needed supplies with us, and we hiked back to the location of the heifer kill and prepared to spend the night. We had several big steel bear traps that we set near the carcass of the heifer then settled down in a protected spot to spend the night. It was agreed that one of us would stay awake at all times and that I would take the first two-hour watch. After my two-hour period ended, I awoke my companion to take the next two-hour watch; then I promptly went to sleep.

I awoke several hours later to find my companion also asleep. It was then that I heard noises nearby that I took to indicate that the cougar we were after had caught our scent and was checking us out. I became very alarmed and spent the rest of a miserable night afraid to sleep again and very much aware that I did not know nearly enough about cougars and their habits to know if this one might attack us or not or if there would be any kind of warning or not. This episode ended without anything really happening. The cougar went away, and we did not see him. He did not get into one of our traps or disturb the carcass of the heifer again either.

Today, I fondly think back on those days and those events as being some of the very best of my entire life. I wish I could bring them back again, but I know that can never happen.

Today there is a vehicle bridge across the Nestucca where once we crossed the river on a rickety cable bridge. The Forest Service built the bridge and roads all over the area to access and protect the forest lands. This enabled the building of a road all the way to the homestead, but it is not almost unusable and the old homestead property is now unoccupied. The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde purchased the land. The Forest Service also built a road northward from our river crossing (Clarence Creek db) that eventually joins the Trask River Road near Tillamook. I have traveled many of these roads since I have retired and returned to Oregon, and, of course, these drives bring back many old memories of those days of so long ago.

I would very much have like to have bought the old place when it was for sale, but it was sold before I realized it was available for sale. All my wishing has little purpose, though, because it would have been difficult to find enough money to conclude the deal. It sold for a lot more than I could have afforded to pay. Life can be that way.