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Comments

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Colorado Clif

I have never known why Clif Grubbs called me in the Spring of 1968 and asked if I would like to buy a piece of land in Colorado in partnership with him. But he did. I had only known Clif a couple of years. We had become acquainted as a consequence of a similarity in circumstances -- we were both regularly assigned the duty of teaching the large sections of Introductory Macro-Economics. Each had about 500 students. As we discussed our experiences, it was apparent to both of us that we regarded teaching to be our primary reason for being professors. A mutual respect quickly developed that was to grow and to flourish for the next 30 years.

I did not know what to expect when we flew to Denver that late-Spring day. When we went to see the land along with a real estate agent, it was lightly snowing, cold, and there was a low dark overcast. I knew we were high in the mountains because we had just driven for over an hour almost straight up from Boulder to Ward (elevation 9,400 feet). But I could not see them.

We looked at several sites before being shown a particular plot that was about 3 miles from an old mining town called Ward. It was located on a beautiful mountain stream -- Jim Creek -- that rushes downhill through the entire width of the property. Colorado is full of sites that have mountain views but private land with mountain views and running water is rare. We knew this was the place. Across the creek lay the Roosevelt National Forest. On the side of the valley on which we stood, the land rose upward as far as I could see. The hillside was covered with Ponderosa pines, blue spruce, and, of course, the magnificent aspens. The next day, we bought the 10 acre tract.

A few months later, we went to Colorado to spend our first summer in the High Country. As would be usual, Clif arrived before I did. He had set up his tent down by the shore of Jim Creek. When I arrived, I set up my tent high up on a bluff overlooking the valley. In the ensuing days, we began the process of building the infrastructure -- a road and a bridge over the creek (to be later named the John Silber Memorial Bridge for our combative Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences whom we both admired for his pursuit of excellence and reverence for teaching).

About a week later, a downstream neighbor invited us to come for dinner, as he and his wife had taken pity on us as we had struggled to set up our first camp in the wilderness. After the dinner, we walked home along the creek -- stopping to appreciate the calm, cool night air and to enjoy the magnificently clear view of the starry heavens above. After cooking a cup of coffee on his portable gas stove and drinking it by lantern light, we retired to our respective tents. Within an hour, I was awakened by the jolt of a powerful blast of wind. It was so strong, that it literally knocked me off of my portable bed spring and on to the ground (no minor feat). Moments later part of my canvas tent was ripped-open by another gust. I struggled to keep the tent from being torn from its moorings and rolling down the hill with me inside. I have never experienced sustained winds so forceful. The high winds kept up for the remainder of the night. By dawn, I was exhausted and I decided to see how Clif had fared down by the creek. Half way down the hill I suddenly became aware that about sixty head of cattle were stampeding through the valley below led by a wild black horse. It was like a surreal scene from the Fellini movies that were popular in that era. After they passed, I made my way to Clif's campsite. There I noted that sometime

during the night he had pulled his old station wagon up to the front of his tent and had lashed his front tent pole to the bumper of his car to keep it from being blown away. He had slept on the back floor of his car but had been awakened and witnessed the stampede that had just transpired. It was quite an initiation to the vagaries of mountain living.

The following year, 1969, we began the process of building our respective cabins. Finding and clearing level sites proved to be challenging tasks as they don't call the Rocky Mountains "rocky" for nothing. Eventually it was done. That same Summer, Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. Armstrong called his landing site "Tranquility Base." I suggested we name our valley the same. Clif was ecstatic about the idea and it was so-named, although we often simply referred to it as "the base."

Subsequently, I had built a prefabricated "A frame" for my cabin. As for Clif, he hauled in a home trailer around which he built and expanded a magnificent wooden cabin over the next few summers. It is a showcase representing the work of both a master craftsman and a Rube Goldberg. But everything works and everything was designed "to last for 50 years."

While the work was very physical and the cabins and infrastructure are monuments to the expenditure of blood and sweat, the work provided us with opportunities for hours of conversation that are my most hallowed memories of those days. The morning ritual of drinking his specially filtered coffee, the daily work tasks, and the numerous "breaks" were always filled with discussions of public policy, economic issues, philosophy, and world affairs. Never gossip. These conversations continued over the years after the building phase ended. To be with Clif on a daily basis was like being involved in a never ending academic

seminar.

It was in the course of these conversations that Clif's brilliant and original concept of the "American Solution Mystique" took shape. The Mystique is "the uniquely American conviction that all problems can be solved." Whereas technological problems (like the moon landing) can be specified, modeled, and solved, most social issues cannot be. As the challenges facing the country have shifted increasingly from technological to social issues, (like race, family structure, drugs, crime and violence), they go unsolved because, in fact, they are dilemmas without definable answers. In this regard, he foresaw years ago the current era of mounting frustration by the public with government as it has sought to grapple with these social developments. His greatest fear was that ^{the} most logical outcome would be the spread of anarchy among the citizenry. The destruction of government that is now the daily work of self-serving politicians in Washington only confirms the wisdom of his prophetic insights. So does the declining voter participation in elections.

If you were willing to listen, you could always learn from Clif. For he knew economic theory inside and out. He knew its strengths and its weaknesses. After all he had written his Ph.D. thesis at Harvard under the supervision of the noted mathematical economist and Nobel prize winner, Wassily Leontiff. But he was also well versed with the critics of mainline economics such as John Galbraith at Harvard and those influential dissenters on the economics faculty here at the University of Texas under whom he had earlier studied -- Clarence Ayres and Bob Montgomery.

Clif was also a first rate mathematician. It should not be forgotten that the course he was brought to teach here at Texas was "Mathematical Economics" which was part of his

teaching load for a number of years. While he loved both mathematics and economics, he did not believe they mixed. He hated the course. Economics is about people and the human condition which meant its teachings change depending on circumstances. It is time sensitive. Mathematics is about universal principles that are applicable everywhere and at all times. It's not about human events. As soon as he was promoted to the rank of full professor, he vowed he would stop teaching the course. He kept his word.

He turned to his real interests -- economic history and philosophy for the remainder of his life's study. The time in Colorado afforded him the opportunity to read, to write, and to dialogue. While he was a prolific writer, he wrote primarily for his own edification, for the intellectual stimulation of his students and the enlightenment of his colleagues and friends. He did not feel an imperative to publish. He did not seek professional accolades because he was convinced that he would be forced to constrain his views to meet the preconditions required for professional acceptance. He wanted no part of it. He wrote to live; he did not live to write.

Clif could be gruff and impatient -- especially when he encountered triviality or pomposity. But he could also be incredibly gentle and sensitive. Yes, he liked to pontificate but he was also willing to explain and to listen. He was the consummate teacher both in the classroom and out.

It was not all work or talk in Colorado, of course. There were numerous occasions for celebrations -- such as the first time that the LP gas lights went-on and the lantern era ended; or the completion of the intricate gravity flow water system; or the first time that the hot water tanks were installed so that the days of baths in the freezing cold creek were finally

over. In the early days, the celebrations often meant an evening meal in the nearby town of Nederland where he had found a marvelous cafe called the Branding Iron. It served thick, aged Colorado steaks; delicious, thinly cut fried onion rings; fresh vegetable salad; ice cold Coors beer; and homemade pies.

It was in that same cafe one night that Clif received a telephone call from his wife informing him that he had won the coveted Danforth Prize (also known as the Harbison Teaching Excellence Award) as the most outstanding college teacher in the nation that year. It also had a \$10,000 honorarium. It was a cause for added celebration. The owner of the cafe, who we had come to know so-well, told everyone who came in that night that Clif had won the Nobel Prize so he was treated as an instant celebrity by everyone in town.

At times, birthdays also were excuses for celebrations. Coincidentally, the dates of the birthdays of both Clif and me as well as those of both of our wives, Anne and Tina, fell within the span of six consecutive summer days -- between June 29 and July 4. Clif, of course, was the "yankee doodle boy, born on the fourth of July."

Colorado became to Clif a place to escape from the awful memories of the war in Korea, as well as the frustrations of academia and the heart breaks and pressures of everyday life. It became more valuable to him with every passing year. As his health began to fail over the past decade and after he retired from teaching where he had been rejuvenated by his annual encounter with students, the yearly migration to Tranquility Base provided him with a reason to go on. In my last telephone conversations with him in late March and in early April, he announced his arrival plans and I sought to find a way to overlap my visit with his. He said that this would be his "last trip to the Base." The final encampment. There would

be much to say.

In his next-to-last letter to me, dated March 23, 1995, he concluded with these vintage lines that aptly summarized our Colorado experiences:

"I am, however, comforted by the thought that once again when high summer rolls around again this year, when the Aspen bloom and all of God's creation stands in astonishment in our little Valley, you and I will have the chance to shoot the shit, as in days gone by."

How I wish it could be so.

Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.