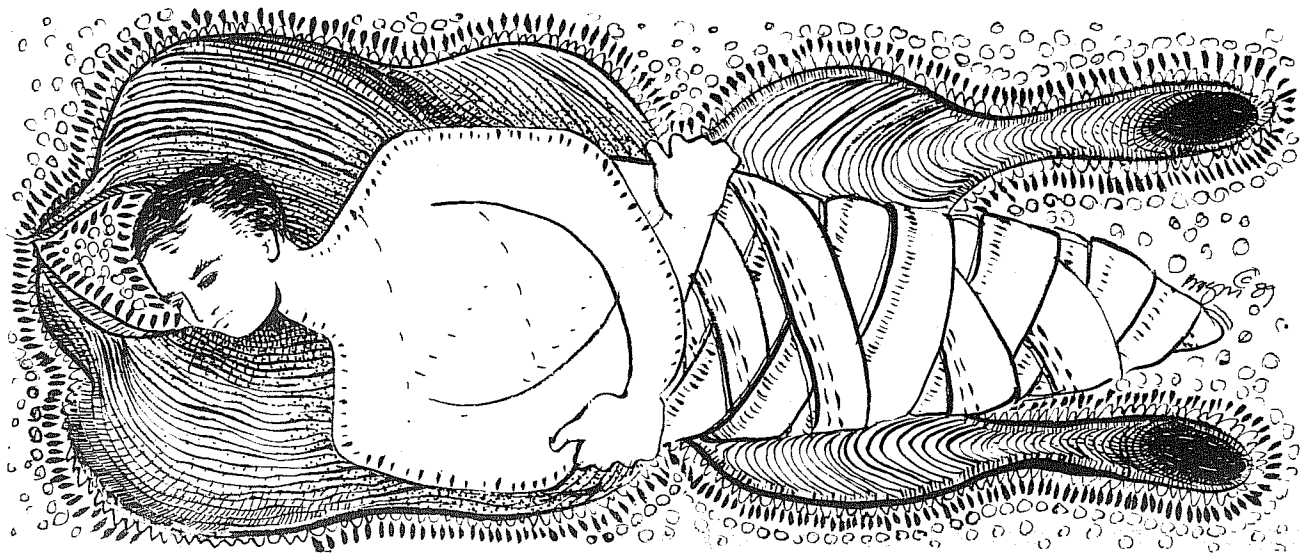
I arrived in Lander, Wyo., on June 4, 1979, three days after the difficult birth of our first child in Washington, D.C., wearing wool slacks, a tie and a callow expression. I don't remember much about that first sweaty day, except the interiors of the Hitching Rack, the Atlantic City Mercantile and the Union Bar, where a Shoshone looked at my outfit and said to Dan Whipple and me, in a suggestive voice, "You two tough cowboys?"

The job of *High Country News* editor was mine, said Dan (who'd voted for another candidate, a guy who played the banjo), because the paper couldn't afford a second plane ticket to interview somebody else. That evening, on the grass by the Little Popo Agie River at Joan Nice and Bruce Hamilton's place, an animated family of be-jeaned *HCN* supporters gathered to chew chicken and look me over; Phil Heywood played his eloquent guitar and said hardly a word, young Louisa Wilcox sat crosslegged on the ground and talked fervidly, Bruce politely ignored it when I mounted the fly reel above the cork.

I would say now it was the best leap into uncharted landscape I've ever taken. So far.

THE HIGH COUNTRY NEWS LATHE RESHAPES ANOTHER EDITOR



by Geoffrey O'Gara

Berthenia and I initially slept on Joan and Bruce's floor with our infant daughter, and that's the way life was for a while — improvised and dependent on the kindness of strangers. There was not much room in the *HCN* budget for an unhurried education in Matters Western. I masked the big gaps in my knowledge by editing fiercely and questioning everyone else's assumptions. I kept talking vaguely about wanting to see more people in *HCN*'s stories, landscapes portrayed with the vividness of Hannah Hinchman's "Afield" column, fewer laundry lists of issues.

One reason for the sometimes colorless writing was clear immediately — you couldn't go everywhere and talk to everybody in an enormous region, though it was suggested that a few extra pennies on the mileage compensation could fatten up a $7,000 per year salary. I wrote two long stories in my first year — two that I can remember, anyway — about places I had never seen.

One was about cattle leases on the Charles Russell National Wildlife Refuge. I included what I hoped was a moving description of a couple on a small ranch whose reduced grazing leases threatened to wipe out their herd — I've yet to meet the people or their livestock.

The second story was about the Northern Tier Pipeline, which was going to carry its energy cargo through some delicate wildlands up north. It was a few months after I wrote the pipeline story that I made it up to Missoula, and hiked with a college friend up a canyon along the pipeline's route. In the article I'd described the vegetation and wildlife of this canyon intimately, and I was in a nervous sweat to check the accuracy of my blindman's bluff.

But I saw almost no wildlife. That was because my friend — a wildlife biologist transplanted from the East — took out his new .44 and began blasting away at a tree, exclaiming about the pistol's accuracy. It may illuminate my ambivalent relationship with *HCN* to confess that I was intrigued enough by my friend's hitherto unseen gunslinger side to care less about the raptors and ungulates he drove away.

Only the brevity of my acquaintance with *HCN* enabled me to imagine I was radically making over the little biweekly. I'd never read a word by founder Tom Bell, who had moved to Oregon well before my arrival. My *HCN* education consisted of reading a few recent issues and clippings; from these, I concluded that the writing was lifeless and unpopulated, and that many of the articles leaned so far toward an "environmentalist" viewpoint that they toppled. I thought the tabloid design — on cheap, quick-to-yellow newsprint — was kind of ugly looking, too.

I spent three years editing and writing for *High Country News*, and in that time it never dawned on me that I was mostly wrong, or, at least, off the point. My excuse — an excuse editors before and after at *HCN* could claim if they needed to — is that with pressing deadlines and short staff I never had time, until I was free of the newspaper, to go back and get a sense of its earlier rhythm, its passions, its many voices.

It was not until 1982, when I quit as editor, that I began reading old *HCN*s, slowly, and finding values there, people there, that I missed the first time. I discovered the subtlety of Bruce Hamilton's unwasteful prose, the thunderclap of Tom Bell's anger, and the way all these environmental battles and ideas were percolating in Joan and Bruce and Tom and Marjane Ambler, and the many writers who joined them.

When it was young (well, it's still young, but when it was younger) *HCN* had the smell of gunpowder: It was dispatched from the frontlines of a war that had just broken out in earnest, by people swept up in a passionate, perhaps unexpected, conflict. When there was time, *HCN*'s writers were perfectly capable of putting out nicely crafted, poetically worded pieces, and did. Many of the things I thought I helped bring to the paper had been there already... but you had to search them out among a cacophony of elbowing issues, some of which were more urgent than a deft sentence.

While I was editor, *HCN* widened its field of vision some more — we ran pieces about people outside the environmental field who were displaced by mine shutdowns or grazing lease cutbacks, and we ran some

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lengthy, personal journalism, like Don Snow's wonderful story of his struggle to understand his Utah roots. With Kathy Bogan's help, we dolled the newspaper up with fancier typefaces and better newsprint. We even — using "humor" as an excuse — printed some of my ear-numbing doggerel. I loved running what I thought was new and innovative stuff. We were making the paper prettier, wider ranging and more artfully written.

But in retrospect, I'm not sure it greatly helped *HCN*. This is not false modesty, and certainly not remorse. But I think in fact there were many readers who may have felt *HCN* was somewhat adrift during those years.

For one thing, I was not nearly as involved in the environmental movement as my predecessors — I had claimed a journalistically higher ground of disengagement from direct activism. In a sense, this put a distance between me and *HCN*s most loyal, longstanding readership. I had faulted the earlier staff for embracing environmental causes without sensitivity for "plain people of the Rockies" (that cliche is for Myles na Gapoleen fans), the miners and shopkeepers and loggers who felt their jobs and recreational joys threatened by wilderness designations and anti-pollution laws.

But in fact I did not know well either those plain people OR the environmentalists: It was a third constituency, a literary audience, that I was unconsciously trying to please during my turn at HCN's helm, a phantom audience that may not ever have been there.

When *HCN* made its next big change, the move to Paonia in 1983, I was no longer editor: I was freelancing and serving on the *HCN* board. It was undoubtedly the most difficult transition in *HCN*'s history since Tom Bell's sudden departure. The board had to choose between two different directions for the paper in both the figurative and literal sense — north (to Montana) or south (to Colorado). As one of the swing votes on a deadlocked board, I voted for south.

Decisions like that are anything but objective; they're deeply personal. You want to apologize afterwards to the people whose lives you've changed. I had come slowly and belatedly to empathize with what *HCN* had been before my arrival. My understanding had greened up quietly and gradually and minutely, like the Wyoming desert in April. I suspected that the paper's most loyal family — the region's environmental activists — had only marginal interest in seeing the publication beautified.

I understood better that Tom Bell, by virtue of his lifelong involvement in the life of a small Wyoming town, had heard and been heard by — however perturbedly — those "plain people" I babbled about so often. And I thought the direction back toward both those audiences was, in this case, south, to Colorado. Despite their East Coast resumes, the Marstons had worked for years as community journalists in Paonia, and there is no better way to get to know those plain people than to typeset their classifieds; and they had produced, too, a West Slope environmental paper.

Without any gnashing of teeth, I voted to refute important aspects of my years at *HCN*. The paper was not, in fact, getting anywhere by becoming more literary, more beautiful. Subscription rolls were not growing; the letters column was too quiet. A barebones little storefront sheet with a lot of fire and news and information for activists was closer to *HCN*s roots.

I don't know, of course, what *HCN* would have become with a Montana dateline with Don Snow as guide. But I imagined then it would have become more the publication I had once dreamt of — visionary and literary, graphically sophisticated, moving the masses with fine writing. And that's why I chose Colorado.

My direction on the other hand has been, figuratively, north. I ran a small community newspaper for a few years — my personal search for the "plain people," you might say — but I continue to grope for that Western literary vision that inchoately motivated me years ago. A particularly "Western" school of serious literature is quite fashionable in publishing circles now, but no one quite knows what they mean by it: Richard Ford, who is today probably our most lionized "western" writer (no fault of his own), was eight years ago hailed as one of the great new "southern" voices — he lived in Mississippi then.

I find the search for a literary home among these mountains and plains galvanizing in any case, just as I did when I tried unwittingly to map its coordinates in *HCN*. I'm frankly dubious that it's even there, but it doesn't really have to be — a writer who spends a lifetime writing his way toward a literary place will, if lucky, ultimately create it.

Perhaps the oddest thing is that I'm still here, when so many former cohorts have exited the region. That may sound plaintive, but that's the way it sometimes feels: I thought I was the most-likely-to-move-on member of the staff, secretly harboring itineraries for world travel while the others all sunk their roots deeper. A few weeks ago several members of *HCN*S former staff still in the region got together in Jackson ... Marjane Ambler, Dan Whipple, Kathy Bogan, Hannah Hinchman. We gathered to hear Phil Heywood play the guitar — not on a riverbank this time, but in a fancy bar... he still doesn't talk much.

I think about these people even when I don't see them, in a sort of relaxed, sometimes worried, always familiar way. An institution like *HCN* doesn't take new directions so much as it acquires new personalities, and lets them put a few new lines on the institution's face. Working at *HCN*, I doubt we knew what we were doing at the time we were doing it; but we fit together nicely and learned a few things from each other, and the pace and stress were crazy enough that everyone was intimately revealed. It's comfortable getting back together. We don't relive our *HCN* days much, because, like the publication, we've all built on that foundation, changed.

I, for one, now play the banjo.◆

There is no better way to get to know those plain people than to typeset their classifieds.