



## From the Director's Desk -

### Celebrating Thirty Orbits Around the Sun from Colorado

As 2022 turns into 2023, I've enjoyed 116\* seasons and a full 30 trips around the sun since I moved to Western Colorado one summer to pick fruit for Dean and Irene Phillips on F Road in Grand Junction.

Dean and Irene also owned land on Orchard Mesa outside of Hotchkiss. When that crop was ripe, I stayed in a basement below their son, Ron's home there. One week I might be picking apples on the orchard high on a bench astride Grand Mesa overlooking the Uncompahgre plateau, the clouds reaching toward us from far into New Mexico and Utah, the next day I might be sent before sunrise to pick peaches at the F Road property.



I met the Phillips at a farmers' market after spending a night along the Colorado River near Dewey Bridge where I collected a film canister of red sand that still sits on my desk. I would return to Utah many times. Before leaving the Pacific Northwest, I told a lot of folks about my plan including Dean and Irene's son Scott, whom I knew from college that I was considering being a writer. All I wanted was a pickup truck, a dog, and a life in a small town at the edge of the wilderness somewhere in the West. Coming home to a place where I had never been before. To build a life. To prove something. I've now done that. Back then, I rhapsodized about wanting a café where I became a regular ordering bacon, eggs and pancakes where the waitress knew me by name, which is how I came to my first chosen town in Colorado. I don't go out for breakfast much. I loved maps and identified places in Montana, Idaho, Nevada and Colorado that fit the description. Scott suggested I just go work for his parents in Colorado that summer and see where it led.

I headed East from the West Coast to find my West in a new 1992 Subaru Loyale (\$9,700 sticker and \$240/month payments).

I came to Colorado after a liberal arts education capping 16 years of schooling, and intense people work managing people in the housing program at college. I arrived seeking some solitude, and also to learn from the people and from places. I preferred small towns, as far disconnected as possible. That wasn't so difficult before cell phones or the Internet. My choice of work was mostly manual labor which was also unusual among my graduate peers. I was escaping the expectations of career, and what I considered a trap of suburban dystopia where I was raised. Growing up, the edges of Vancouver, Washington were constructed around me, and the speed of their assembly reinforced the sense of disposability. In those years, new families among us continued to move out to wealthier suburbs, the homes they left behind occupied by less tidy neighbors. I watched neighborhoods go to seed. In my time two of our primary grocery stores closed gutting retail centers that chased wealthier suburbs further out. The first grocery store I remember getting Matchbox cars at turned into a huge VCR video rental store. We visited places in Oregon and Washington, the coast, the mountains that had more character which made me romantic about rural America. In Colorado, each weekend after the Saturday pick was done before noon to protect the soft fruit from the sun, I went shopping for new towns while exploring. It was easy to cover the basic costs of living at odd jobs. You could still earn keep that way then.



Thirty years on, I'm still in Colorado. The Hotchkiss place is still there bearing fruit. Delta County hasn't changed much. The F-Road property, just outside of Clifton succumbed to its' last harvest, becoming a subdivision. Grand Junction is just a whole lot more of what it was then – a confused bustle of a city sprawling across the desert, set in motion by cycles of the extractive industries, though now it has become a lot more hip like Boulder than it would care to admit. Most of Western Colorado has. I've learned a lot about land use and community development, and why places become special and others don't. The Western Slope—Delta, Montrose and Gunnison were

yet to have a single “big box” retailer and only a few fast-food chains when I arrived. Traveling there and through Southern Utah, including Moab (which Edward Abby had already written off as tainted) felt as if it were still in 1950s America, rural and mostly poor with residents neither angry nor sad about it.

Come fall, when all the orcharding work was done in Hotchkiss, the aspen leaves around the house turned golden and sounded papery in the breeze. The days remained warm as the edge of cold closed in at dusk. I fell for Colorado then. Alone in that basement in Hotchkiss, exhausted from a day of labor, I read everything I could about the region and poured over maps, planning where to go over the weekend – hiking in Utah red rock country or in the high alpine of the San Juan Mountains. I fell for Colorado's sunshine despite how disturbing extended weeks of sunlight felt for a kid from Portland. Then I fell fully for nights when you could leave open a window and the coolness of the mountains poured in from the valleys hinting of snow after a balmy fall day of goldfinches and pinion jays. I loved that Colorado was a desert pretending to be lush.

All that may explain why after moving to the Eagle River Valley I chose to work outside framing custom homes for five years, then continued in construction management for another ten. Working “bags on” with my hands, I appreciated the turning of the seasons on a job site as a framing carpenter. My wife taught in Eagle County Schools, as she does still. I'm not sure that someone as idealistic as myself, a fruit picker and carpenter marrying a schoolteacher could get a foothold here now only 30 miles from a resort town, even with a bit of down payment assistance like we got from her parents, and that worries me. I've been fortunate to be trusted by my fellow citizens enough to be elected five times to serve them. Their trust and my will to learn as much as I could about the role, how the civic realm operated propelled my education. I am still a student, learning by doing, taught by place, circumstance, opportunity, and a growing web of relationships. I've had a role in a lot of changes to my small town and our county, helping shepherd it forward while retaining some of the old character. Across the West, certainly in Western Colorado, thousands of people have had their own version of my experience from different points in their lives, coming here.

To be accurate to the calendar this should have been written last June except that being a Coloradoan is not a summer matter. Where I lived my first two years in Colorado after picking fruit, you were not considered a local unless you had spent a winter toiling with the locals. I spent two years in a town 9,000' up tucked into the San Juan Mountains. Northern Exposure was on TV. Being in Lake City then was a lot like that except for the moose. When I left Lake City for Alaska, the Post Office clerk who had lived her life there was incredulous. She said, “I thought you'd be sheriff here someday.” No one has ever given me a higher compliment. In a way, I've been trying to live up to that compliment since. It's been 30 winters since those 300 residents of Lake City accepted me as one of their own as I waited tables, shoveled the school sidewalk, and did handyman work on summer cabins. Since then, I've been fortunate to have spent most of those seasons in Eagle where one spring has melted into the others in my mind, just like one morning now melds into the next while working from home in the house I designed and built 20 years ago. I live in a subdivision on a golf course, but the bears, badgers, elk, and the coyote don't honor our gentrifications. I like it that way.

Colorado perspective is born in winter. These can be trying seasons in the high country. I want to share with you what makes winters magic for me. The sudden rebirth-waking up to a “perfectly” white, untrodden landscape—recalling a world unspoiled, if only through a cup of coffee. The way the afternoon light can last forever, then the day ends suddenly turning us inward. The wonders of a dark sky—one lit mostly by the moon, remind me of our small place in the universe (dwarfing our egos). The sudden change of weather reminds us to not pretend that we succeed by imposing our plans on the day, but by adapting to what is given. I inhabit winter as a time for heroic intake of books, rest, contemplation and reset. There is a day ahead and much we can bring to it.

There is a lot to be concerned about in the world right now. At the post office this past week a neighbor and I opined about the unauthorized uses on the groomed XC ski trails, complained about the cracks in the paved path, then laughed at the silliness of our privilege. I think what we in Colorado have to offer a troubled country and world is mostly perspective. It should be a perspective grounded in place, in common-sense, can-do people who work together. This winter's eve, I'm hewing to that vision that brought me here, that I have something to learn, and maybe there is a chance we can live up to the beauty of what is given to us here.

I remember a billboard in the Canadian Rockies when I was bike touring long ago that said, **The Mountains Shall Bring Peace to the People**. We could use some of that. My message for the new year is to take note of the turning of the seasons and abide in change.

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