



IT SEEMED COLDER NOW.

Just risen, the sun pierced the snowy valley. The cows gathered and waited around the watering hole, which had frozen over during the night. There was no water for them to drink.

Our pickup crawled toward them, through the snow and across the pasture. We stopped, got out, and John White picked up an axe and walked through the cows. Too cold to move too far, they barely stepped aside to let him pass, their breath rising in the air.

He chopped for a minute or two until the ice finally broke. With each whack, the hole became bigger, more pronounced. I could hear the water gurgling, the splashing sounds as he scooped up chunks of ice with his axe blade. By the time he quit, the watering hole was 3 feet wide.

He stepped aside. The cows pressed in and began to drink.

As cold as it was, it wouldn't be long before the hole would freeze again. John chuckled about the winter and the hard work it required to care for cows on days like this. We would have to keep an eye on it this afternoon, he said, probably return before evening.

I looked at the frozen willows, the bare cottonwood trees and the snow-blanketed mountains around us. I thought about how winter's days cruelly tease old cows, many of which stood broadside to the sun to catch what warmth the sun could muster.

John and I returned to the pickup. The radio crackled and popped, barely audible, drowned out by the blowing heater. I don't know why we left it on, given the lousy reception. Once in a while a song or the news would break through, and our thoughts would shift from the cold to faraway places.

Simple advice

John was bundled up against the weather. He wore a heavy, somewhat worn-out jacket that had kept him warm. He pulled the flaps of his winter cap down over his ears. He had new gloves, a Christmas present from his daughter. They made him happy. The soft leather felt good. He pulled them off, reached for a can of snuff and stuffed a pinch under his lip.

"Don't ever do this," he advised. "Take care of your teeth."

John was like that. Simple actions. Simple advice. Simple example. He was a man of

action, good deeds and quiet accomplishment.

All of this came to an end in December, when he died suddenly. His family buried him on a cold afternoon in Clover Cemetery, which overlooks the pastures and hay fields where he spent so much of his life.

John came up the hard way, but he kept his humor, happiness and direction intact. He gave peace of mind to those around him. Whatever the conditions, whatever the task, two things would happen when John arrived: people would lighten up and laugh a little, and the work at hand would get done.

No exceptions.

Remembering

I met John in the early 1970s. I was 8 or 9 years old then. He was in his 40s. He was uncomfortable around people he didn't know, often suspicious of newcomers, but he trusted you completely once he got to know you. He lived a private, often guarded, life focused completely on his wife, Jean, and their children.

Next to family, he loved most to ride his bay mare. He was fearless and inspiring, plunging off the steepest hillside to head off a wayward cow or crashing across an oak-brush ridge to stop a runaway calf. I can still see him mounted and at a dead run, riding hell-bent for Texas. He was absolutely fearless, but he always had cautionary words for us kids after he trotted back.

He was gifted with tools, too. He had big, fumbly fingers, the kind that made us doubt he could put back together the machinery he took apart. But things always ran better, more smoothly, after John took his turn at it. He bailed me out of mechanical troubles more times than I can count. I could stare at a piece of machinery all day and never see what was wrong with it. John could look at something for 30 seconds and have it fixed within the hour.

He came to work for my grandpa in the early 1970s and remained there for 17 years. I can't recall his missing a day. He always was first on the job, lined out and ready to go. He and my grandpa became best friends, working side by side for many years.

John grew up on the sagebrush range near Maybell, Colo., just a few miles from nowhere, the kind of place most people drive through, if they go there at all. John was just a boy when his father died, so he left school to support his family.

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Life didn't get any easier, either. John joined the Army in the 1940s and fought

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Hitler's troops across Europe. He lugged a machine gun through mud and snow. It was cold there, too.

When he came home, he married Jean, raised a family and eked out a living. His highest aspirations were to raise a few cows or sheep, provide a good living, and find a little happiness in the West's open spaces. He wanted nothing of the outside world.

I don't think I ever thanked John for all he did. It bugs me that I didn't. I had my chances to tell him, but somehow I let it slip through my fingers. He wasn't going to die, after all; he was a young man. There would be other chances.

I remember as he closed in on retirement that he cared less and less about the cold. His hands cramped with pain. His knees and hips hurt him more than anyone knew. He talked about the extended vacations he and Jean would make during warm summer days once he didn't have to work anymore.

I think he did some of this. I don't know for sure. He and I lost contact when he left the ranch and entered the quiet years of his life.

I called my grandpa yesterday afternoon. He had just returned from the funeral. We talked about John and his family, his kids and Jean. Grandpa was happy they buried

him nearby. It was an appropriate place for him to rest.

"He was like a brother," he said.

"He was like an uncle," I thought.

Then we parted ways. Grandpa had calves to feed before it got too dark; I had phone calls to make. So we hung up and went about our business. I paused for a few minutes to look through the window. The sun was just setting over the mountain. Snow had completely blanketed the valley, and it would be very cold soon. Nighttime had just risen from the valley floor. No doubt there'd be plenty of ice to chop in the morning.

