

Floating Through the Center of the Universe

The Fire Mountain Canal. This name has no history; there is not a single trace of its origin. It came to fit quite well though, when nearly three-quarters of a century later flames engulfed the mountain above the winding waterway.

It was July of 1994 on a dark Monday night. A thousand points of red light twinkled in the distance, like city lights, as tree stumps burned themselves out. Just hours before, a raging wild fire raced across Oak Mesa. Now, any trace of life above the canal was scorched and dead. Charred tree trunks with ghost limbs stood to six feet. The ground was covered by an inch of grey ash, still hot to the touch hours after the wild fire consumed the forest. But our farm was safe.

The Wake Fire of '94 consumed 3,000 acres in three days, and had it not been for the Fire Mountain Canal, our farm would have been consumed too. The papers reported, "900 firefighters extinguish 'Wake fire' in Paonia, Colorado," but it wasn't the firefighters that saved our farm that July, it was the canal. The high water and surrounding dirt road deprived the flames of fuel and prevented them from crossing onto our land.

The canal winds 34.7 miles from the edge of Somerset all the way past Hotchkiss. It is fed by the runoff of melted snow from the Ragged Mountains. The water is 40 degrees: enough to take your breath away and turn your entire body numb. The ditch through which the water flows is five feet deep, ten wide and supplies water to Paonia, Colorado and farms on the surrounding mesas. Without the irrigation water from the canal, the farms would not exist.

Some people have never heard of Paonia. It is a quaint town, population 1,582, on the western slope of Colorado, 60 miles west of Aspen as the crow flies. Paonia is the place where my Pop grew up. He says it is the center of the universe.

If you ever go to the center of the universe, and to our farm on Sunshine Mesa, you will see a big white barn. The floor of the barn is made of cement. Closer scrutiny of the floor--just below the rusted red wheelbarrow--reveals a modest inscription: "July 3 '25" and below that "Bemis." Bemis was a builder. He built the big white barn, and a little log house just a stone's throw away. He lived in the log house long enough to establish the farm. Then he sold out: house, barn, and forty acres of apple orchard, to my Grandma Mary and Grandpa Norman. That was in 1947.



Bemis didn't just build barns and houses. He founded the Fire Mountain Canal. He planned its 34.7 mile route, decided its 5x10 foot dimensions, and helped dig it into the earth in 1924. Bemis

created the liquid border between Oak Mesa and the land on which he lived. He created the canal that gave the land life.

The Fire Mountain Canal is a lifeline, through the center of the universe. For me, this watercourse is the most special feature of the most special place. The canal provides water for all the farms and it saved our farm from a wild fire; but it appeals to me for another reason.

The canal is beautiful water. Cold, deep, brown snowmelt. Sprinkled with crickets on sticks. Water skippers dart across its surface. The water is cold enough to make my toes ache when I dip them in. Grass lines its edges and roots, snake-like, dangle from the muddy bank while snakes, root-like, slip in and out of the murk. Uphill from the canal stands that army of ghost trees, scorched by the fire of '94. They are dry, crumbly, and tired. Yet the canal promises life, providing for the green shrubbery at their roots and beckoning the occasional deer from behind their stillness to the water's edge. The canal is alive with motion; a strong current draws it south.

I was not quite three years old when I first went into the canal. Pop says I was fearless. Most people squirm uncomfortably in the canal; I felt the cold water and smiled. I plunged my head under and came up breathless, energized. I found my place in the water.

In his journal two years later, Pop wrote: "We came home in time for a long and successful dip in the canal, thanks to Clara's suggestion and persistence. Clara was the first in, towel and all. When she surfaced her eyes were huge and filled with thrill." A 1999 entry, four years later reads, "Clara insisted on a float down the ditch. In fact, she got us to float twice from the middle head-gate to the white bridge. Frigid. We got so numb we turned dumb." To me, the familiar numbing of limbs and belly from the snowmelt on that summer day was an invigorating high.

One midnight, the full Hay Moon of July shone over the pasture, and an odd feeling came over me. I turned to my brother and declared that we would go floating in the canal. Moments later we were in our suits and on our way.

The black water was crisp. The full moon was a brilliant pearl, shimmering off our skin. And streaking across the night sky were a billion stars at the center of the Milky Way galaxy.

That midnight trip to the canal sealed my love. I like to go alone now. I have gotten to know the water, the grass, the mud. On these solitary trips, I shed my clothes, then thoughts of the past, and finally thoughts of the future. I let go and allow myself to be utterly present. Then I am home. The cold water wraps me in a blanket; I cannot feel my skin; I can only feel me. No clothes, no worries, nothing but the water and the current and my soul. Yes, in the canal I have truly found my home. Somewhere quiet and beautiful, outside, surrounded by mountains and an endless sky. A place where I can be me; where I can be unconditionally present. It is my bliss, floating through the center of the universe.