

Home Below Hell's Canyon

Excerpts from Grace Jordan's account of her family's life along the Snake River.

They would become one of Idaho's most prominent families. But in 1933 when Len and Grace Jordan moved their three children to a remote ranch on the Snake River, they were more concerned with surviving the Depression's devastating effects. The years the family would spend at isolated Kirkwood Bar Ranch in Hell's Canyon would be arduous yet rich in adventure and camaraderie. Before Len became a U.S. senator in the 1960s, Grace chronicled their rugged life in her book Home Below Hell's Canyon.

Len and Grace Jordan received the BSU President's Award for Life and Letters in 1981. BSU annually sponsors the Grace Jordan poetry contest and will name a ballroom in the Student Union in her honor. BSU hosts an annual lecture series on economics in his name. Home Below Hell's Canyon was published in 1954 by Thomas Y. Crowell Co., New York.

INTO THE CANYON

Kirkwood Bar was the sheep ranch which my husband and I, with a partner named Dick Maxwell, were buying. It lay in the Snake gorge, on the Idaho side, just below Hell's Canyon, that deepest scar on North America's face, through which the river is not navigable and where even foot travel stops. The business arrangements had been completed while I was with my parents, a day's journey west of Lewiston; and though I knew something of sheep ranches, I had never seen one in the shadow of an impassable canyon.

It was spring 1933, and the financial shaking of the past three years had jolted the Jordans badly. In those years we had abandoned running our own stock and had managed for another stockman, sometimes doing on wages of less than \$100 a month plus our living, and I longed to get where we could operate again for ourselves, regardless of any physical hardship such ownership



GLENN OAKLEY PHOTO

The house on the right was home to the Jordans during their time in Hell's Canyon.

might involve. I was not disturbed by the isolation one must expect at Kirkwood and the two children were almost as eager as I to reach the new place their father had described in his letters.

PENALTIES OF SUCCESS

The canyon could make and break a man. For example, a stockman might come in full of ambition — I could think of several who had. The canyon would let him do well, and he seemed to be on his way to success. The opportunities here were unusual, because of the favorable climate and the good range — the range remained good because it was inaccessible. The stockman could have the range as long as he paid his fees and used it right.

So, before long, he found himself on his financial feet, but he should not assume therefore that the canyon liked him and had put him in the permanent file. At this point the man tended to grow satisfied and a little lazy. One day he might become careless on the trail and roll with his packstring; or he might be rowing across the river and forget to watch, whereupon a hidden boil would

catch him. Perhaps he emerged safely that time, but he shouldn't let it happen again.

Two years have passed, three or four. Our man is older now; he is full of self-esteem because of the way he has added to his land and stock. He sees that he is abler than other stockmen; he insists on their recognizing his superiority. Meanwhile there is somebody he loves and must depend upon, but distrust infects their relationship.

All of his moves become selfish, and he is determined that whenever there is a disagreement it must be settled his way. Ugly temptations steal into his daytime thoughts; he loses the clear, open look he used to have. His neighbors cease to turn to him; he is no help and no comfort to anyone. It is better to avoid him.

Now he should have left the canyon — according to my theory — after it yielded him what his ability and his labor entitled him to. But he didn't do this, so now he suffers the penalty: he becomes ugly; he goes on to become treacherous.

SUICIDE SWITCHBACK

My housebound existence had begun to

pall on me, so one mild morning before the lambing rush, when Dick said he had to go to Temperance Creek and asked me to go along, I was overjoyed. He said we could have dinner with Anna (a neighbor) and be home by four o'clock. Eagerly I consulted Len. He agreed to stay close to the house this one day, so I mounted Babe and off we went.

Up to now I had been only a mile or two up the river and I both longed and dreaded to explore further. Dick rode ahead, and when we had cleared Halfmoon and the blunt, low ridges beyond it, he called to me that Salt Creek was opposite on the Oregon side, and that we were now starting to climb to Suicide. At the word I began to congeal.

Suicide is a single portentous rock, the end pier of a dominant volcanic spine that runs from high in the divide to meet the Snake. As our trail ascended, without switchbacks, edging nearer the drop, it also narrowed. We made a bend and were suddenly out on the face of the cliff. Far below a segment of the Snake boiled down in a frenzied S from invisible Hominy Bar. Presently the trail became a virtual stairway, one rock step above another, each one sloping out, with a flimsy coping of small stones to mark the edge.

Dick called, "Don't lean toward the wall that way! If you can't ride straight, lean out!"

Lean out! I hardly dared breathe for fear of capsizing Babe, and Dick wanted me to lean out! In anguish I prayed. If I went off this trail, who would care for my children? Why had I ever left them anyhow? Desperately I hoped that if I made it over the rock to safety there would be some other way to get home, not over this hair-raising height. Suddenly the trail was again a trail, leading into a boulder-strewn recess. Dick said, "Get down a minute. Now you see, if your horse slips when you're leaning in, your weight will throw its feet over the edge."

I nodded dumbly. He moved to where he could look down on the Snake. "They say you can spit into the water from here. It's three hundred feet, I guess."

I stood on the lip of the void and timidly flung a stone, but it vanished.

"You're past the hard part," Dick said.

BY RIVER'S EDGE

After the noon dishes were done, the children were free; and later I had my one sure moment in the open, when I crossed the creek to feed the chickens and gather the eggs. If there was still time I took the kids to the river, merely to scramble around among the boulders and see what we could see. There were always interesting tracks at the water's edge, and other surprises if the river was high, for the Snake had already made its way for hundreds of miles, collecting tribute as it ran. Once a whole staircase floated by.



Len and Grace Jordan moved to Hell's Canyon to operate a sheep ranch in 1933.

Bridge timbers with great bolts were not uncommon, and in flood time, trees with terrifying roots hurtled down, sometimes diving under, then shooting out of the boiling tide further below, ejected by some unseen force.

FISHER OF STURGEON

This was the year Dell became our man. Earlier we had observed him coming and going as he fished for sturgeon along the river. To market his catch, he had to depend on the boat, and it in turn depended on the weather and the stage of the river. A six- or eight-foot sturgeon waiting to be butchered could be left tied to the willows like a horse hitched to a post, but not for very long; and sometimes when the boat was delayed Dell had to release his fish.

Sturgeon are ugly. They look like sharks, with their heads taking up a large part of their total length, their mouths set far under their snouts and their jaws overhung with creepy whiskers of flesh. Down their backs they exhibit spiny dorsal plates. A few years earlier sturgeons that would "fill a wagon bed" were often reported caught in the Snake, and I saw one that thirty people dined on for three days. But by this time a seven- or eight-footer seemed very satisfactory.

GOODBYE TO KIRKWOOD

On Friday morning the sun came out with specious promise, and though I did not trust it, I began putting the last things in the boxes and marking those that must go on the mules

and setting aside those that could be sent out later.

Saturday dawned weak and deceitful, but I was resolved to get away before the rain could make up its mind. By eight we were ready, with three solidly packed mules and enough saddle-horses for everyone.

As we rounded the bend that would shut the house from view, I took no last look, and the children were not thinking about such a thing. Along the creek the wet trees sprinkled us as we brushed through, but the rain withheld; and after we started up Sumac Gulch the trails were almost dry. With not a single untoward happening and with increasingly bland skies, we reached the top.

The canyon was dropping farther behind, and I could no longer see the Oregon rims, because of the pines through which we rode. The children and I were through with the Snake River, and as soon as we could sell the ranch for what it was worth, Len would leave it, too.

Our period in isolation had given the children resourcefulness, and put a color into their childhood that would be hard to buy — at least Len and I believed this. Also we were confident they could adjust themselves without great pain to public school and life in town.

Of course, we, their parents, had taken the canyon adventure too seriously. But over-seriousness about work is not so much a fault as it is a stage. Our next adventure might be lighter in spirit, but it would have to be connected, as this one had been, with producing something. Of that we were both sure. □