

Charred

The pressure canner I gave my wife in 1965, the year we married, the one we used to can thousands of pints of venison, green beans, halibut, salmon, and one year, that I used to can one hundred thirty-one quarts of moose was lost when I moved to Fairbanks in 1988. I needed to replace it, but with kids grown, I didn't anticipate doing more than occasional canning. A few loads of salmon a year. I didn't have the money to invest in a canner I wouldn't use often so when I saw a pressure canner advertised in Eastern Idaho's *Thrifty Nickel* for much less than a new one, I bought it even though it was a model that didn't use a pressure gauge, what I had insisted upon when I purchased the first one.

In 1994, a new wife followed by a few months the acquisition of the canner. I was beginning anew what I had begun nearly thirty years earlier, even to reestablishing a flock of laying hens and a flock of black turkeys.

My new wife, Carolyn, had seen the results of a pressure canner explosion when she was in school: she refused to can with pressure. It fell to me to process meat and green beans when necessary.

I know as well as anyone the dangers of working with steam. I spent years in the pulpmill at Toledo, Oregon, working on recovery boilers with 350 pounds of pressure in steamlines, where steam escaping from a leak is invisible but can cut a person in two. I also worked on the batch digesters, which used that steam in conjunction with *white liquor* [NaOH] to breakdown wood chips. I attended safety lectures about detecting and handling steam leaks. I had filed grievances about uninsulated steamlines being where they might be accidentally grabbed barehanded. I knew what OSHA rules then were. So if anything, I was overly familiar with steam and how to handle it.

During fall 1998, while living along Idaho's famed Clearwater River difficulty arose when, after processing a load of meat its correct amount of time, I vented this still new-to-me canner to let steam escape. Over the years, using the other kettle which closed differently, I had, once the pressure was down a ways, developed the bad habit of cracking the lid to hurry the cooling process, thus enabling me to remove jars or cans while everything was still very hot. Turnaround time was very quick. I could, with the other canner, process a load of pints for ninety minutes at ten pounds pressure every two hours or a little less. But this new canner doesn't want to release its lid until after it has cooled to lukewarm, making it difficult to quickly process a second or a third canner load.

One night, late, wanting to hurriedly process a second load after the pressure was down, I forced this new canner's lid. Its rubber seal gripped both lid and kettle, preventing the lid from turning. But I am stout. The lid was going to turn. But when I gained that eighth turn needed to free the lid and lifted it, all of the canner's liquid contents followed the lid up, out, and onto me, scalding my stomach through shirt and T-shirt, and because I wasn't wearing shoes in the house, scalded the top of my left foot. I was quick enough to get my right foot out

of the way.

I knew better than not to be wearing shoes. Yes, I did. OSHA would have had me wearing safety toes. But even wearing a pair of dress oxfords would have prevented the scalding.

Digressing a moment, I, like most small businesses, find OSHA a dirty acronym, an offense on par with “IRS.” There were years when I deliberately didn't hire employees because of the burden OSHA regulations would have caused me. To continue in business I had to make do with what I had to work with. If that meant cleaning parts in a plastic bucket of gasoline rather than in a metal parts washer with cleaning solvent, then parts were washed in gas. The parts had to be cleaned before they went back into a customer's saw. I didn't have an option about how I cleaned them.

At the time, there were two banks in Kenai. One was, and had been for years supporting Ron's Rental, the Homelite and the Stihl chainsaw dealership. The other bank supported Fred Braun's Sport Shop, the OMC outboard dealerships. I sold Jonesred and Husqvarna chainsaws, Chrysler outboards, and repaired Mercury outboards—I was the new business on the Peninsula. Partly by choice, partly because no one was interested in hiring me for wages, I had opened shop without enough money to pay for the business license. My choices were either collecting welfare or creating a job for myself: I chose the latter even though Hillary Clinton wouldn't have approved. Yes, I was very much an undercapitalized small business, so undercapitalized being a business seemed like a joke if making enough to buy groceries every day wasn't such a damn serious business.

There are some, like Mrs. Clinton, who begrudge those without capital the chance to earn a living—it is as if we have no right to live in this nation, let alone to work. We are to look for jobs where there are none thanks to bureaucratic decisions made three or four thousand miles away. Then when we give up looking and begin to work for ourselves, finally obtaining that business license, we are to provide healthcare to employees when we don't even pay ourselves wages ... I don't understand Mrs. Clinton's thinking. I'm one of however many millions-now that are without health insurance, without unemployment insurance, without retirement savings, without capital while micro-loans are made to entrepreneurs in third world nations so that the individuals receiving these loans can escape the poverty of the nation of their nativity while in this country war is waged against those of us who would dare start a business without even obtaining a micro-loan.

I couldn't get financing until a third bank opened in Soldotna, and then that bank, Alaska Bank of Commerce, was so undercapitalized that before I could borrow money from it I had to find a depositor to put the money into the bank ... borrowing never seemed worth the hassle, so profits were plowed back into the business to build up inventory so there was something to sell—so the business looked like a “business,” and not like a hobby. And with profits going into building and inventory, we lived on salmon from the Kenai River and potatoes and eggs, the eggs from free-ranging hens, the potatoes Alaskan grown.

Most bureaucrats, who aren't worried about their paychecks, haven't any idea of what it takes to keep a small business operating. OSHA could have been a good idea if the government didn't take an adversarial position against small business,

typified by Hillary Clinton's comment about she couldn't be responsible for undercapitalized businesses. I wouldn't want her as an OSHA inspector. She would, in all likelihood, be, for different reasons, as vindictive as the inspector at Kenai ... in December 1976, I was doing some work for Ron's Rental in Kenai. Ron had gone to school with the then OSHA inspector for the Peninsula. They weren't buddies as classmates; they weren't buddies fifteen years later. And when that inspector pulled a 3:00 o'clock, Friday afternoon surprise inspection, Ron thought he had just lost all of December's profits. He knew he was guilty of numerous violations, most of which he didn't have the money to correct.

But this was when Alaska still had four time zones. Sunset was a quarter till three. Wanting to be home before the Sabbath began I had cleaned up the shop and had left for home about a quarter after two. Ron knew I would be leaving early, but he didn't know when. He had been busy with customers so I had only waved to his wife when I left through the back door.

In all the time I knew Ron, I never saw him happier than when I came in Monday. The inspector was certain he would find all kinds of violations. Those violations had been there before I rolled up the air hoses, and in general, cleaned up the shop for the week, putting everything away, dumping our buckets of gas in which we washed parts, etc.

Evidently the inspector's disappointment had shown on his face.

That inspection wasn't to correct poor working conditions for employees. It was a *gotcha* inspection that was payback for high school insults. Well, Ron wasn't *got*, and the inspector never returned.

Hopefully, talk (as I write this) of OSHA possibly inspecting home businesses will be nothing more than this digression: Federal bureaucrats don't have to wear horns and hooves as they interrelate with taxpayers just trying to better themselves, or as is often the case, just trying to make ends meet.

I wonder what regulation would have prevented me from burning myself, what regulation would have prevented over-familiarity, which, unfortunately, does cause carelessness, and carelessness causes accidents that should not happen. I shouldn't have burned my foot. I should have waited to open that pressure canner, but I didn't want to be up all night. It was already midnight. So I have no excuse for what I did other than I was performing an unsafe act and I didn't get away with it. OSHA regulations and inspections would not have helped: the problem was my attitude, not knowledge level, not equipment, not working conditions.

Because I took care of the blistering on my stomach first without realizing how badly my foot was burned, I ended up with a more serious injury than I would have had if I had reversed the care. The top of my foot was literally parboiled. The flesh was cooked in an area a couple of inches square (and this during the whitetail rut). This burn caused me to miss couple of weeks of the best hunting. I was lucky, though. I harvested a nice buck the next to last day of a six week long season.

The burn didn't keep me from working because I carve sitting down, with pieces on my lap. But I had to be careful how I held the bowl on which I was working. A wrong move and a scab was torn loose, and I began to wonder what it had been like for Grandpa who had been caught by fire while cleaning ditches, an

activity, I believe, that is still exempt from OSHA regulations.

When Grandpa Kizer married and moved down the road the mile or so from where he was born, he bought forty acres and then somehow acquired another forty acres that was an unclaimed buffalo wallow, which he drained, cleared, laid out into fields, then tiled the fields, all around the turn of the last century. This Wells County area of northeastern Indiana is about as flat as land comes. In order for tiled fields to drain, drainage ditches are deep, their sides steep.

Grandpa farmed these same eighty acres until he died when seventy-nine. He was, I believe, seventy-five when he was burned—he wasn't a young man, but he was still hoeing by hand his fields rather than spraying herbicides. He had been burning these ditches for fifty-plus years. He knew what he was doing. So what happened? How did he let that fire catch him? Uncle Jerry said he was overcome by smoke and passed out. Had Grandpa, over the years, grown used to standing in the smoke while he watched the fire's progress? Perhaps. I know I burn ditches only when the wind will push the fire in the direction I want it to go. I suspect the same was true of Grandpa. Burning ditches isn't something that has to be done on a particular day, but can be put off until the wind is right.

Fire and smoke are a little like steam. We all know their inherent danger. We use them, control them, but never possess them as if they were things. We tend to forget that, though. We tend to think we do possess them as we do a clawhammer and nails. We tend to think we don't have to watch them as we would watch a child around a swimming pool. Because of that tendency, every so often they hurt us.

Grandpa lost his leg at the knee.

I didn't seek immediate medical attention for my foot. After all, it was only a burn ... when I still lived at Siletz, a fellow I knew ran out of gas. Another fellow stopped and one of them tried to siphon a little gas into a can while smoking, not usually a recommended procedure. The fellow ended up with a four inch, third degree burn on his forearm. Instead of obtaining immediate medical help, he went home. He died from shock a few hours later.

Shock concerned me as I felt its ravages for several hours, all the while keeping my foot packed in ice and with cold packs on my stomach. I have felt shock before. Several times. After shattering my right kneecap and splitting my right femur, I laid in a snowbank for an hour while waiting for an ambulance. I packed an old blacktail buck three miles off a mountain after tearing the cartilage in my left knee. I was then younger, stronger, less wise. My knee hurt so much I didn't want to return for the buck, but the thought of abandoning him never occurred to me.

After the skin on my scalded foot sloughed, I realized I needed someone to look at the burn. Gangrene took Grandpa's leg to his knee. I'm not sure he truly recovered. He certainly healed and learned to walk with an artificial leg, but he couldn't walk the fields as he had before. Still, the last time I saw him, he was hoeing corn—it took him a week to hoe all of his fields, about sixty-five acres of his eighty acres.

I wasn't particularly excited about the possibility of losing my foot. In fact, as I looked at the mess of damp, cooked meat, I remembered a boiler fireman, Stan Bittner, telling about when he should have lost his hand. He was working, during

the Depression, in a mill making ground wood news-pulp, and he got his hand between the log being ground and the stone grinding wheel, an accident OSHA might have prevented. Probably not, though. Stan's hand was mangled. Bits of wood fiber and grinding stone were mixed with blood, bone and flesh. The doctor wanted to amputate immediately. But Stan was a boxer: he didn't want to lose a hand. The doctor told Stan that he wouldn't waste his time cleaning up that mangled mess, but if Stan wanted to wash out every bit of foreign matter, the doctor would see what he could do about saving Stan's hand. The nurse brought Stan a basin of water and a bar of soap. Stan said he spent an hour getting every wood fiber out. He said he didn't know anything could be so painful. But when I worked with Stan thirty years later, he still had that hand, and it functioned much better than he would have needed to box.

The physician's assistant who gently and carefully scrubbed away the dead flesh on my foot was a man my size. I had met him before. He worked with my wife, and he felt he knew me well enough he could speak freely about subjects usually culturally avoided, namely religion. He was worried about what would happen with Y2K in a year. He thought that the spiritual millennium was about to begin, that a worldwide computer crash would usher in that time of tribulation the likes of which the world has never seen. He was convinced that the Mark of the Beast was Sunday observance and that with the latest Papal letter our individual freedoms were about to end.

I never know how much to say in these situations. It isn't that I'm uncomfortable with these subjects, which are addressed in my writings. It's that I read, "No man will know the hour," where the context clearly conveys the sense that a person won't know when Christ will return or when the Millennium will begin. Setting dates, looking for a particular date are acts of vanity, not exactly what I want to say to the person working to save my foot. And someday, the doomsayers will be proved correct. Those are the ones who will be tough to live with, but until then, I need the use of my foot, especially during deer season.

The physician's assistant wrote a prescription for Silvadine cream. Three days later, he couldn't believe how good my foot looked. Nor could I. My foot had virtually healed in those three days.

Because my foot had been parboiled, it never had about it the scorched flesh smell that Grandpa's leg had, and it was that scorched flesh smell which prevented Dad from visiting Grandpa in the hospital. After Grandpa was burned, Dad got within two doors of his room before he had to turn around and leave the hospital. At the time, his sisters and brothers didn't understand—and Dad hadn't talked about what he had experienced in the War. He died without saying much. Mom did get from him that he had spent a week cleaning up a twenty mile long German column that had been napalmed. Summertime. Hot sun. Burnt men and horses. Only German forward lines were mechanized. Horses were still being used for transport in their rear positions.

I once killed a feral cat and threw it in our burning barrel rather than burying it. But I didn't immediately set the barrel on fire. It was also then summer. Flies blew the cat's carcass. The first thing I knew I had a barrel full of maggots that stunk unbelievably. I poured a couple of gallons of gas into the barrel and tossed in a match—I just thought the barrel stunk before. The stink of burning flesh and

maggots was more than I could take; I had to leave the area. It was a gagging stench that got into my lungs and didn't seem to come out. I couldn't expel it, couldn't take another breath. And it wasn't like anything I had smelled before. It wasn't like burning grease although its greasiness might be why I couldn't exhale the stench.

I don't have adequate words to convey that stench, but after smelling that burning flesh, I can imagine what twenty miles of decaying, charred flesh must have smelt like although I suspect it was probably a lot worse than I can imagine. And therein lays my difficulty: my words will validate the experience of the person who has been burned. He or she will remember what the pain was like, how their burn smelled, how it limited their activity. But my words are inadequate to convey the smell or the pain to the person who has successfully avoided being burned. No simile, no metaphor will assault that person's sense of smell as will charred flesh.

I returned to the university in midlife. There, I was told to *show*, don't *tell* by a faculty with total ambivalence towards OSHA. I wrote descriptive passages about sunsets and heavy seas, which in their plethora of words merely validated readers' experiences seeing sunsets and rough surfs. Raymond Carver uses this problem as subtext in "Cathedrals." Linguists wrestle with signifieds and signifiers when Peirce's element of Thirdness is always present: is it possible for a known signifier to convey an unknown signified to a reader? Today, Christians have no problem seeing the Apostle John's scorpions in "Revelation" as helicopters, whereas John had no signifier for what he saw and could only describe the image.

Is there a reason to write if I am my audience?

Sometimes when I read Feminist criticism, I don't think there is. But something is gained when wrestling with an uncomfortable text even if it is merely seeing shadows of strange signifieds.

My uncles and aunts didn't understand why Dad couldn't visit his father in the hospital. Some unkind things were said to Mom about Dad not visiting. I think even Grandpa thought Dad should have done more than stop by that one time to bring him his wallet.

When I mentioned this to Dad's youngest brother Jerry at a family reunion forty-plus years after the event, Jerry understood perfectly why Dad couldn't stand the smell of charred flesh. Those additional four decades had given Uncle Jerry the experiences necessary for him to at least darkly relate to the horror of twenty miles of scorched flesh.

A text might not be for today; it might be for tomorrow. This text that lacks outward unity might not be for today.

* * *

[\[Home\]](#) [\[Back to Essays\]](#)