

TRANSFORMATIONS

Winter is a wonderful season for walking. I love the cool air, the clarity of the light, and the myriad colors of green beneath my feet. This is the high point of the growing season for mosses lichens and liverworts. Lacking the distraction of spring's flowers we can fully enjoy these "lower plants" soft textures and weird shapes. Tiny fruiting bodies catch drops of water that sparkle in the occasional ray of sunlight. Liverworts on the oaks, like rude snakes, stick their little tongues out at us. Recently, in search of winter's lush treasures, Chuck and I decided to walk on some old logging trails that we had not visited in several years. The area we chose is uniquely interesting, because, until 1962 when most of the forest was devastated in the legendary October storm, it had never been logged. After the storm there was salvage logging and seven years of cattle grazing on this small, oddly shaped parcel of BLM land comprising the headwaters of Camas Swale. At the highest point there is a small remnant stand of very old, possibly four hundred year old, fir trees. Another shred of old forest still stands at the east side of the BLM parcel. Between these two old woods lies what we used to call the "Big Meadow on the BLM."

When we moved to Fox Hollow in 1969, it was sunny, grassy and swampy. The only trees that I remember were two lovely middle-aged incense cedars growing in a little cirque rather high in the meadow. There were a few Douglas firs to the West of the meadow as well. The soil was poorly drained, pale clay and it seemed that no tree was ever going to grow on it again. The BLM had it replanted three times, but only in the late 1970s, after the cows had been gone for nearly a decade. Had trees finally started to grow. Suddenly very interesting things started to happen.

At the old log yarding stage, just where the land started to drop precipitously into the Creswell Valley, a grove of madrona trees appeared and flourished. The young Douglas firs, which had been a sickly yellow green in their early years, turned a normal color and shot up. The swampy flat places became impenetrable alder thickets. Where there was shade, the grass disappeared and was replaced by a rich variety of mosses, so that by the 1990s the term "meadow" was totally inappropriate, though we continued to use it. Then something dramatic and mysterious happened. At the edge of the alder thicket in a small, still grassy place, before the path climbed back into young fir forest, the earth subsided, opening huge cracks. Deep wide wet gulches cut across the old road in several places. Why didn't this awful erosion occur just after the logging? Why did it not occur during the years when the road was being used by trucks and livestock? Why did the earth wait to subside until it was well vegetated? I think a geologist would find answers in the nature of the fine, slick, clay soil lying thinly above a deep basalt core, or perhaps there were frictional forces building up for decades until they could not be denied. The event just made the "Big Meadow" more interesting, though somewhat less accessible. But it really was the alder thicket that discouraged walking. Luckily I had forgotten about that when I suggested we go for a walk on Saturday.

The first thing we found was that by now, even the old road had young fir trees growing on it. The planted firs were taller than houses and stood above rich pillows of moss. The little madrona grove was gone. Hundreds of incense cedars filled the spot. Tall and thin, the remaining madronas stood guard over them. These cedars must be the offspring of the two old cedars we loved so well. Now the woods were so dense we couldn't even find the cedars. Young incense cedars often appear in dense groves, but it is a slow growing pioneer species and will eventually be overtaken by Douglas firs. Turning west, we continued down hill to the swampy flat land. Where were the horrible gullies? Not quite filled in, they were edged by moss and surrounded by fir trees. The land had healed itself. Onward to the dreaded alder swamp we walked. The path was very wet, but where were the alders? All but a few had died, and those that remained formed a stand of tall trees to the south of the path. Had all the other alders

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succumbed to overcrowding? There were many rotting sticks all over the trail. Did a big snow knock the alders down and deer consume them? We will never know.

The next day we returned to the BLM and walked to the East of the baby cedar forest where we carefully descended the very steep slope towards Camas Swale and crossed the big deep old gullies that form the beginning of Camas Swale's creek. Now we were walking in a mature forest dotted occasionally with huge and very ancient trees, fire scarred ponderosa pines and Douglas firs. Here, even in this lush habitat, the soil is very thin and rocks project above the mosses everywhere. The tangles of windfall trees are slowly rotting and turning to moss that in turn will decay, building soil. We climbed to a high place, and then to an even higher and rockier place, but there was no view, only the view of the lovely old trees swaying in the winds, announcing the coming of another storm. The lack of a view is a very good thing, because the wonderful old forest is only a thin fragile peninsula projecting into recently logged timber holdings below.

If there is a mystery here, it is “why are there never any chanterelles?” I think I know the answer. I believe it is because, historically, this place was not a forest for a long time. A fire, maybe several centuries ago, burned the forest. Then perhaps it was maintained as open land by Native Americans and only returned to forest in the twentieth century. Or maybe the thin rocky soil needed a century or so to return to woodland. In any case, I believe there was a period of time when chanterelle mushroom mycelia could not thrive and died out, just as they have done in the last few years on logged land near us.

We left our lovely forest and took the quick route back. That is, we rolled under the new barbed wire fence, rolling out of the moss and into the briars, standard groundcover for a clearcut whose logging road would take us back to our starting point in half a mile or so. In two hours we had walked through history: the history of a meadow which we had seen change from a cow pasture to a forest; the history and mystery of a remnant ancient forest; and finally, the recent history of forest destruction, as economic pressures demand that people value boards for housing more than the forests themselves.

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