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HOMESTEAD

A MEMOIR

Jane Kirkpatrick

Cover photo by Jerry Kirkpatrick: the landscape of the homestead on a winter morning.

HOMESTEAD

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To Jerry,
who kept his faith in God,
the dream,
and me

Desire accomplished is sweet to the soul.
PROVERBS 13:19

Moses' hands became heavy…[so] Aaron and
Hur supported his hands.
EXODUS 17:12

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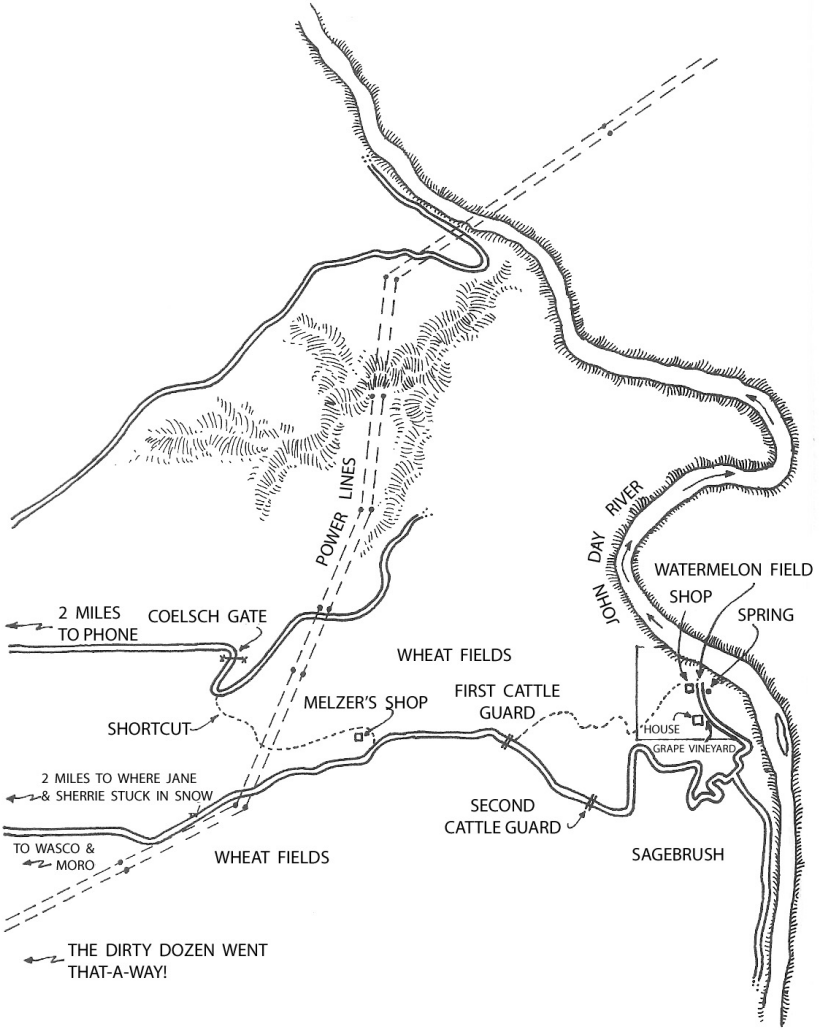
POWER LINES
JOHN DAY RIVER
WATERMELON FIELD
SHOP
SPRING
2 MILES TO PHONE
COELSCH GATE
WHEAT FIELDS
MELZER'S SHOP
FIRST CATTLE GUARD
SHORTCUT
HOUSE
GRAPE VINEYARD
2 MILES TO WHERE JANE & SHERRIE STUCK IN SNOW
SECOND CATTLE GUARD
TO WASCO & MORO
WHEAT FIELDS
SAGEBRUSH
THE DIRTY DOZEN WENT THAT-A-WAY!

Prologue

LIKE STEPPINGSTONES ALONG a meandering stream, dirty puddles of water dotted the dusty road. Nothing more than a trail, really, the remote old road cut a wagon-width path through rolling acres of Oregon wheat fields. Barbed cheat grass and weeds growing between the tire tracks scratched against the bottom of the almost-new Datsun station wagon.

A tail of dust billowed up behind us, which seemed odd, with water standing in the road.

"Must have been a rain shower shortly before we got here," I noted. I shifted down, slowing the car as we hit the first puddle, spattering mud against the bright red paint. The slower pace helped us maneuver the ruts, already hardened, which another vehicle had carved into the road some time before us. Slowing down didn't relieve my anxiety about being on that isolated trail, however.

Slick, tarry mud pulled against the tires, forcing a fishtail swerve. The men wouldn't be happy if they knew we were driving here without anyone knowing. Traffic was so scarce that no one would find us for days if we had trouble. The wind blew untethered across the wheat stubble, pushing at the little car as we bounced across the old, hard ruts and swerved through the puddles.

Years later, that trail would become the symbol of our conquered fears, of plans made and shifted, of the fickleness of nature and the constancy of faith, and of the kindness and complexity of the people who changed with us because we all drove down that old rutted road to carve a new one.

But on that day in 1982, I drove on that road for the first time.

"Jerry has always driven when we've come here before," I said to the somber passenger beside me. "But I'm sure this is the right way. I just didn't pay that much attention to the distance, so I'm not sure how far the dirt road goes before we reach the river." My friend, Kay Krall, nodded, her white knuckles grasping the door handle.

We traveled a few more miles in silence.

Pungent puppy breath steamed the edges of the windows. Too young to leave behind, two eight-week-old puppies accompanied us. Occasionally, we tried to drown out the squeals of the roly-poly pups by turning up Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* playing in the tape deck.

I adjusted the rearview mirror to deflect the sun's glare as it began its descent behind Mount Hood. Dusk would settle in soon. It would be unwise to stay out here until dark.

A massive power line stretched across the road in front of us, cutting a slice through the fields. The power company had replaced several of the huge steel structures and, like a giant deserting his Erector Set, tossed the old ones in a graveyard heap next to the road.

Beyond the power line lay vast miles of wheat land and prairie, with neither buildings nor trees to break the view. Wheat stubble glowed dark gold on either side of us, a sign that harvest—and the afternoon—was completed.

Fortunately, no snow yet slicked the narrow dirt road of Sherman County—Oregon's smallest—or dusted the fields like powdered sugar over fork-pressed peanut-butter cookies.

Purples and deep oranges on the rimrocks broke the dusky shadows in the distance above the John Day River—the river that would change my life, Jerry's, and the lives of others in ways we couldn't have imagined then.

As Kay and I rode in the Datsun, we couldn't see the river yet; but I pointed, directing Kay's eyes to the top of the dry ravines that broke steeply to the stream below.

An occasional chukar, a game partridge, ran down the road in front of us before lifting and setting its striped wings to soar down one of the deep

ravines. A mule deer popped its head above the sagebrush, then, seemingly unconcerned with our presence, lowered its head to resume grazing.

The puddles disappeared from the center of the road as we rolled down a steep incline. The Datsun straddled more deep ruts before we reached flatter ground. We crossed one cattle guard and then another. Finally, Kay said cautiously, "Just how far away *was* the last farmhouse?"

"There was a ranch about six miles back," I answered with my most positive voice, "but no one lives there. The nearest real person, I think, lives just before we left the pavement, nearly eleven miles back."

Kay nodded again, and I loved her for not saying aloud what she must have been thinking.

The road now wound through native bunch grass and pale sage. "It *is* beautiful," Kay said, though her voice was still strained. "I've never seen so much open space with nothing to break it up. We can see for fifty miles. Sure different from Wisconsin." She was referring to our shared native state, the one I'd left eight years earlier.

As I concentrated on avoiding the larger rocks that seemed to be growing in the road, our pace slowed even more. I hoped the tires were good and that we wouldn't have a breakdown.

Eventually, we dropped down another steep descent on what resembled a cattle path. On Kay's side, the road hugged a hill as steep as a cow's face; on my side, deep ravines cut away from the road's edge. A rock knocked loose by the Datsun bounced like a basketball over the close edge, dropping nearly nine hundred feet to the bottom. I longed for guardrails and reflectors.

We crept around the hairpin turn, the needle not even registering on the speedometer. My foot hovered over the brake. I stayed as close to the inside edge as I could, remembering a time when my mother had driven us on a steep dirt road after a rain in Wisconsin, and the side of the road had fallen away.

And then we saw it: a panoramic view of massive canyon walls topped by ancient lava flows, signatures of river breaks. They'd been carved by ages

of wind, occasional rains, and the perpetual flow of our destination, the John Day River.

The river still meandered as it had a century ago, when thousands of pioneers had crossed it six miles downstream, nearing the end of the Oregon Trail. It meandered twenty-nine more miles before flowing into the Columbia River, separating Oregon from its northern neighbor, the state of Washington. It meandered right through the ranch. *Our* ranch, the one we now owned. There were no buildings, no electricity, no phone; only this precipitous, rutted dirt road to bring us to our 160 acres bordering that wild and scenic river.

I stopped the car, set the brake, and we got out to get a better view. The air was clean and clear. October air. Crisp, but not cold as it was 160 miles south, against the mountains near Bend, Oregon, where Jerry and I had been living during our six years of marriage. I inhaled the aroma of sage and listened to the quiet, which was broken only by the piercing call of a red-tailed hawk and the low chattering of Canada geese settling in along the river for the night.

Kay surveyed the view. I heard her catch her breath at the winding road before us. It had been simply bladed out of the side of the ridge and wound down like a potato peel past a tipped-over car deserted long ago. Other more vertical and now abandoned trails scarred the hills above it.

"The road goes all the way to the river, but I don't think we'll go any farther," I said. I wanted to reassure my friend that we would head back out before dark. "Our driveway turns off in another mile or so. It's pretty steep there." I remembered a sharp 16 percent incline with deep ruts that would swallow a truck tire. "When we're ready to leave, I think I can turn around right here," I said, "unless you *want* to go all the way down." I knew I didn't.

Kay hastily shook her head no.

She hadn't spoken. Either she was awed by the canyon, the river, and the road, or she was struggling to find something encouraging to say.

"You can't see the spot where we plan to build," I said, stepping to the edge and pointing. "It's sort of under this ridge, up on a bench, above the river flat, so if the river ever floods, as it did back in '64, the house won't be threatened. And we plan to have grapes on the bench above the river, and an airstrip someplace. We'll need to clear the sagebrush. It hasn't been farmed since the flood, but they raised hay on it then. We'll probably do that, too."

Kay was still silent, so I continued, filling the void. "I know the road is pretty bad, but it is a county road, even this part we're on…"

I didn't really want to know what my dearest and oldest friend thought about our plan to sell everything, leave secure jobs and family, and move here, twenty-five miles from the nearest town and eleven miles from a paved road. Most of the time, I could hardly describe our reasons to myself, let alone to someone else.

"Sometimes I think it's just insane, this plan to come here, grow grapes, and get out of our old ruts; but we both feel so strongly that it's what we're supposed to do. I don't know. Most people dropped out in the sixties. I guess we're just late bloomers," I added lamely.

We had shared our plans with few people, and had brought only my parents and two other friends to actually see the land, fearing the horror in their eyes as they contemplated the road and our "crazy scheme."

Jerry and Kay's husband, Don, were together elk hunting in the mountains, and she and I had toured Oregon for a week, sharing our vacations with the puppies. In two days, she and Don would be returning to Wisconsin, to jobs and routines and normal living. We would be temporarily returning to our normal life too, but with a difference: we had sold our house and were preparing to leave jobs and routines to come here, to homestead.

Kay turned. A tall woman, she looked down at me as she spoke, putting her arm around my shoulder, hugging me as only a great friend can do, and said, "I have a lump in my throat for you."

She squeezed my shoulder into hers as we stood staring out across the

canyon that spread before us. I swallowed back my tears, not knowing I was rehearsing for a future that would take us beyond the old ruts of our relationships, expand our spiritual beliefs, push our bodies to their limits, test our skills and ingenuity, and force us to face our fears of failure, disappointments, and even death.

We couldn't see, then, what lay ahead. We couldn't see the agony, difficulties, and physical pain of harnessing a spring for drinking water, of securing electricity, of building a barn without electrical power, of living in a home so far from supplies, of laying miles of phone wire—twice—in 100-degree heat, of losing acres of crops to wind and days of work to floods. We couldn't see the shell of the plane, the fuselage bent, its wing destroyed, its seats becoming a house for a striped cat.

Nor could we know then of the miracles, large and small, and the people whom we would come to know and care about, who would help us, heal us, bring humor to our lives, share our tears and laughter, and take us closer to each other and to God.

"Pretty awesome, huh?" I asked, swallowing away the tears, trying to laugh. "I'm gonna be a rancher, writer, and rattlesnake fighter!"

"It isn't anything Don or I would want to do or *could* do," Kay said. "But I have no doubt that you and Jerry can make it happen."

I didn't feel safe enough then to tell her that it was our belief that our stepping out onto a cloud of faith, believing we wouldn't fall through, was what enabled us to take this risk.

We lingered a few minutes longer. I had felt peaceful once we had gotten to the land, but thinking of the road back created prickles on the back of my neck. "It could be dark before we hit the gravel again," I said, moving toward the car.

As we climbed back into the Datsun, I wondered just how far our new house *would* be from the pavement.

Gingerly, I turned the car around in the narrow rocky road, and we started climbing back up, then out across the open prairie. As we approached

the wheat-stubbled fields, the road reverted from rock to dirt, the puddles reappeared, and we splashed through the ones I couldn't avoid. We both exhaled together as we plunged through the last mudhole and felt the tire grab the firmer gravel road. I laughed. "It's nice to be back on solid footing."

Kay smiled, patting my hand on the gearshift that separated our seats. "You guys are just incredible. How did you ever find this place?" she asked.

"Divine intervention!" I said. "There's just no other explanation!"

We chuckled together, then, as I began to tell her of this "intervention," not knowing that our faith in that explanation would be well tested. I also could not know then how that faith would carry us through the years as we bounced over the old ruts and onto the new roads we never dreamed were there.

Part I

SEEKING STARVATION POINT

God speaks to each of us:
You, sent out beyond your recall,
Go, to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

—Rainer Maria Rilke,
The Book of Hours, Love Poems to God

The Reptile Road

1

The Burden of a Great Potential

I WAS THIRTY-THREE YEARS OLD in 1979 when we began our grand adventure with the land. Jerry had just turned forty-nine. We were old enough to understand the warning label some people put on life: Be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it. But we were still young enough to wish and hopeful enough to dream.

That's what the land was in the beginning, just something we dreamed about, a vision of "someday," when we would have enough acreage for some cattle. The land needed a year-round water supply and a several-month growing season suitable for nurturing grapes. Room for an airstrip was important too, although neither of us knew how to fly, and we didn't own a plane. But we had completed the aviation ground school and were optimistic.

We also shared a belief that the land needed to support more than just ourselves. In the beginning, we thought of this as physical support, like having enough room for a large garden whose bounty we would share, or for water and space for more than one family.

Later we would consider spiritual or emotional support as a function of the land. We didn't talk about that part much, because there was nothing logical about it.

Our vision was clearest when it was prompted by a news report on the wars and famine in the world or by a sermon on hunger and poverty. Then

we'd both think of the land as a kind of refuge, where we imagined we could survive if things got rough in the outside world.

At other times, we felt the pull of the land without reason, often in the early morning, when each of us would discover the other was awake and we'd lie talking in the cool, predawn darkness.

"I can't explain it," Jerry would whisper quietly. "It's just that I think we might need to care for others, maybe in the family. Maybe my parents or yours, and we need the land to do that."

I understood the feeling without knowing why.

So we had begun looking at property just two years into our marriage, taking weekend trips to faraway places with names like Cove and Spray. We always stayed within Oregon, Jerry's native state.

If it all worked, we thought, when we found the perfect property, I'd quit my job as director of the local mental health center. We'd move there, wherever "there" was, living on the proceeds from the sale of our home and fifteen acres near Bend until the first grape harvest. Or something like that.

Our vision turned vague when we got into finances, or the reality of Jerry's physical limitations, his disability and back pain since falling from a scaffolding, or the fact that neither of us was a farmer, or that I seemed to need a lot of friends and enjoyed my job and liked carrying a briefcase and having my nails siliconed and manicured twice a month, or that we had never lived in an isolated area, or that we didn't know anything about grapes or… on and on and on.

And that's when I'd get scared.

But then the whole idea would seem as elusive as fireflies on a summer night—just another dream, like nighttime dreams that disappear with daylight.

On a June day in 1979, though, the dream was bright, and I was impatient to see the land.

My husband's former wife sat across from me, daintily picking at the plate of pastel scrambled eggs the waitress placed before her.

Looking through the restaurant window, I could see the Cascade Mountains shimmering white against a clear blue sky. A fresh snowfall on the Three Sisters Mountains the night before kept its promise of a cool morning in the foothills where Bend nestles. But by noon I'd be shedding my designer jeans and jacket for shorts and sunscreen.

The more than 270 days of sunshine and the dry alpine air were two of the reasons Jerry had returned to his hometown of Bend, leaving behind places like Ohio and Arizona where he'd made his living designing and building houses and small commercial buildings such as veterinary clinics and machine shops.

In 1973 the accident had left him with four broken vertebrae, two inches less height on his once five-foot-eleven-inch frame, and a changed life.

Jerry had a married daughter, Kathleen, who lived out of state. His only surviving son, Matt, lived with us during the school year. But in a few minutes, Matt would be leaving with Lelah, his mother, the woman picking at her scrambled eggs.

I thought of her as the pastel lady. She always looked so calm and cool, so perfect in pink, so consummately coiffured.

Their oldest son, Kevin, had been killed two years earlier, in 1977, while on a job interview in the Southwest. His body had been found on the Arizona desert, a victim of a gunshot wound. Since his brother's death, Matt had not done well, and the strings that held us all together were pulled tight, ready to snap. Eager for a relief, I was looking forward to being alone with Jerry for the next three months and happily looking together for land.

Jerry had found a listing for some property we'd be seeing later that day after Matt, Lelah, and her husband had left. The listing in the *Nickel Ads Magazine* was sandwiched between "used washing machines" and "used cars."

The acreage sat 160 miles north of Bend, almost on the Oregon-Washington border, in Sherman County. The ad described "320 acres along the John Day River surrounded by BLM [Bureau of Land Management] land. $95,000 cash."

"We don't have ninety-five thousand dollars, Jerry," I pointed out. But such realities never bothered my husband much, which was why he managed to accomplish so many things, refusing to be limited by the facts.

"There isn't much land available along the John Day," he said. "I haven't heard of any being sold for years, except to the Rajneeshees. If this is real, it would be too good to pass up."

"We don't need 320 acres, do we?" I persisted, thinking of my fantasy garden of a few peas and carrots.

But on that day in June 1979, Jerry wanted to see that acreage, so we hugged Matt, shook his stepdad's hand, waved good-bye to Lelah, and headed north.

The pictures we took that day show us beaming happily, Jerry and I waving from inside our green Chevy pickup truck.

My short mousy brown hair stood out against Jerry's prematurely white hair and closely trimmed beard. His face was already tanned to a handsome bronze, thanks to his Choctaw heritage. My sturdy German stock kept me pale. We wore jeans, the casual wear of a Central Oregon Saturday, topped with a western shirt for Jerry and a blue, bare-midriff sun top for me. I planned to sunbathe beside the John Day River.

We left behind the hardy juniper trees and pines of Bend, driving north on Highway 97, passing through the fragrant scents of mint and anise near Madras, then on through towns that became increasingly smaller: the ghost town of Shaniko, then Kent, population 28. A population surge in Grass Valley, 165, was followed by another in Moro, 302.

Few trees dotted the landscape during our morning trip, except in towns where they'd been tended lovingly for years.

Near Kent, where Sherman County began, the fields turned to the greens of winter wheat, or the gold of stubble, or to dark, plowed ground lying fallow and collecting moisture before being seeded in the fall. Rainfall, not irrigation, fed the thirsty soil.

The landscape seemed monotonous, broken only by an occasional grain elevator or ranch. I hoped the piece of property we were driving to didn't look as barren as this.

"No trees," I said.

"Only eight inches of rainfall," Jerry said; then we both went back inside our thoughts.

We drove into Moro, the county seat, one town short of where we were to meet the real-estate agent. We stopped at the lush city park, then walked briefly around the town. We sauntered past a general store, the Branding Iron Bar and Restaurant, and the newspaper office with its double-facade front. Later we learned that the paper came out whenever it wanted to. A white church steeple sliced through leafy trees of a street beyond. Dogs barked in the distance.

Past a little office that turned out to be the library, the flavor of this rural county of twenty-two hundred people was captured in a list on the library window that announced overdue books and their tardy readers. Two titles were checked out to the same person. The first was *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Sex but Were Afraid to Ask.* I wondered, would I want everyone in the community to know that I had that book out? And that it was overdue? The second title, checked out to the same person, was *What to Name the Baby.*

We left Moro, drove ten miles farther, dipped into a dimple within the rolling wheat fields, and found Wasco, a town of three hundred, where we waited for the agent under the shade of a huge locust tree. An old depot building burned hot in the sun, a remnant of bygone years when Wasco had been a booming town with railroads and families following workers who were constructing the big hydroelectric dams on the Columbia River just a few miles north.

Now men in caps and blue coveralls visited in preharvest leisure beside pickups parked in the Sherman County Grain Growers' parking lot. Nearby,

children laughed, eating ice-cream cones as they walked the quiet sidewalks past the little drugstore, a barber shop, a restaurant, and Dale's Clothing and Liquor Store.

Bart, the agent, arrived, and we headed east, following him out of town, driving through more wheat country, and finally turning north onto a gravel road.

When the road made a sharp turn to the left, Bart's truck slowed and pulled onto a dirt road that seemed to disappear into a green field.

This can't be a driveway, I thought.

Bart climbed into our truck with us, and we drove through the field along the faintly visible trail. "It's seven miles ahead," Bart said calmly. "If you buy this place, you'll have to give me rights to fish for steelhead." He smiled. "It has one of the best native runs in the state."

Bart and Jerry chatted about the terrain and the population of the chukar, a favorite game bird of Jerry's, and of the deer herds in the area, while I wondered what a steelhead looked like.

I don't remember many details of our trip that day as we rumbled down the canyon with Bart. But I do remember the first breathtaking view of the river and the 220 acres he showed us first. He was a good salesman, showing us what the land *could* look like—with a lot of work.

Grass rose belly-high to the cattle that grazed lazily along the river. Blue sky reflected in the clear water. A few Canada geese stood sentry along the gravel bars, either early returnees from the south or year-round nesters. Tall, lichen-licked rocks rubbed the river's edge. Bees flitted from wildflower to wildflower as the blossoms' sweet, warm fragrance filled our heads.

Jerry and I walked hand in hand along the river, one of the most peaceful places I'd ever been. We ignored, temporarily, how far we were from civilization and the difficulties we had had in getting there.

"You can grow anything here," Bart said, waving his hand to take in the wide expanse of river bottom. "See those fruit trees there, and the walnut tree? This piece wasn't affected by the flood of '64. Those trees survived." He

paused to admire them. "The growing season goes at least a month longer down here in the canyon than on top. Hard freezes won't come until late October usually," he continued.

"There was a homestead there once." He pointed to a cluster of old farm buildings and trees. "But the house burned."

Burned?

Later I would remember that.

Bart said a family had lived in the house, once, in modern times; they had kids who went to school, traveling the steep, winding road year-round. At least I *thought* that's what he said.

Bart also told us about rattlesnakes and black widow spiders. But I quickly forgot his warnings, proving that we hear what we choose to hear.

We returned along the same road, passing through two gates, still following the meandering river, until we came to the other section of land that was for sale, about 160 acres, ten of it across the river.

We didn't actually drive onto this land. We started up the switchback road, crossed a fake cattle guard, stopped at the top, and looked down over the edge toward the river below. Since we didn't have the money anyway, since the owners wanted cash, and since the only *reasonable* piece of land—if either was reasonable at all—was the first one, which had power running to it and buildings that resembled civilization, and where the land was already under cultivation, I just discounted this undeveloped 160 acres.

I returned my attention to the book I'd brought along.

Bart and Jerry discussed how Bob and Marion Boynton, the owners, had once farmed the piece; and they talked about when the steelhead ran.

An old homesteader's cabin sat on a bench above the river. "Old Con Davis lived there for years," Bart reminisced, taking me from my book. "He had a spring down there somewhere. That could be your domestic water supply. It wasn't hurt in the flood of '64." This last statement was spoken in Bart's softest voice. "Still," he added, as only a grand salesman can, "it's got great potential."

Great potential.

I remembered a poster I'd once had on my office door showing a cartoon character philosophizing that one of life's heaviest burdens is "a great potential."

On the drive back into Wasco together, Jerry asked Bart if the owners would take any less money for the acreage, or break it up, or finance any part of it, since we didn't have $95,000 in cash.

Bart said we were the first people he'd shown the land to, and if we were interested, he'd see what he could do.

I don't remember being interested. In fact, I had a headache, and we stopped at the Wasco Drugstore for aspirin. The white-haired pharmacist took my money, then, surprisingly, handed me a glass of water.

"Anyone buying aspirin on a nice day like this," he said, "must be wanting to take some right away."

Driving home, Jerry and I discussed the land's "potential." To me, it didn't seem to have any. It had a northern exposure, no electricity, no running water, and no buildings other than the weathered cabin. A terrible road wound down to it, and it was covered with twelve-foot-tall sagebrush.

True, it had room for an airstrip. ("But we don't own a plane!")

And while the size was right, the growing season perfect, and the water supply supposedly sufficient, the thought of building a home and living there, deep down in the canyon, so far from anything, sobered me. I enjoyed *reading* diaries of homesteaders, admiring their stamina and grit, but I knew I didn't want to endure the same kinds of hardships myself.

A few weeks went by before Jerry informed me that the owners would only sell the 160-acre section, the plot with no buildings but bountiful sagebrush, though at terms we could manage over the next ten years.

I had secretly hoped they wouldn't sell. It was such a very long way from my manicurist.

The day we actually wrote the check purchasing our "potential," we looked at a detailed map of the region. Our property bordered the John Day

River for a half-mile; it was part of a federal waterfowl refuge. Eight thousand acres of mostly public lands surrounded it. A state scenic waterway, the John Day River, ran through it, and it was reachable on a long, winding, rutted—but public—dirt road. On the map, our property was labeled "Starvation Point," announcing to all the world that we were purchasing "poverty property."

That should have been a sign.

But the most significant piece of paper we carried away that day described the water rights. There was something solemn about the passing on of words written seventy years earlier. The thin, parchmentlike paper brown with age offered barely readable words, but it was the umbilical cord from the past to the present, the key to our survival. If we were to truly live on the land, we needed the river and the water.

Thirty-seven acre-feet of river water went with the property. We hoped it would be enough to irrigate the flat and the bench that paralleled the river, where the grapes would grow. The water was our lifeline, so the assurance of its presence, written there on old brown paper, remains what I remember most of the day we purchased our great potential and began our grand adventure with the land.