

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 74 *CutBank* 74

Article 46

Spring 2011

Stickers

Anne Williams

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Anne (2011) "Stickers," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 74 , Article 46.

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STICKERS

We are ready. I lift the heavy stock gate out of its rocky bed and swing it open so that Gerald can make the wide turn onto the rutted dirt road that leads to the highway. As if on cue, Ruth's dog Scout heads off north from his post on her front porch, ready to periodically trot the fence line until we return. Our journey will take us northeast, from Cortez across the high desert of southwestern Colorado and into the San Juan mountains, through the ever-smaller towns of Dolores and Stoner, up the Dolores River Valley towards Rico. Eventually we will leave the highway and drive dirt roads high into the backcountry on Taylor Mesa.

Gerald's stepmother Ruth is in the passenger seat of this rental jeep we picked up when Gerald and I flew into Albuquerque five days ago. I am in the back, alone but acutely aware of the black box on the seat next to me. Made of pebbled plastic and labeled with his name and the date of his cremation, the box holds the remains of Bill Shearer, Gerald's dad.

Today, on Bill's last trip up Taylor Mesa, we will walk with him through meadows grown knee-high in wildflowers to the crystalline stream where he has caught a lifetime of cutthroat trout. To the place he loved best.

It's not yet eight o'clock, but I have already been to the grocery store where I bought graham crackers—Bill's favorite—some nectarines, and a bag of Bing cherries that set me back more than the price of a meal. We didn't plan a picnic, but Ruth was prepared too, with hardboiled eggs and some apples ready in a paper bag on her kitchen counter. In this country, a day trip requires food and water. We will pass

not one single fast food place and only a couple of gas stations that sell candy bars, cigarettes, and the kind of coffee that sits in the glass pot until you can stand a spoon in it.

For Gerald, this trip to Colorado is one more homecoming in a forty-year pattern of leaving and returning. His latest departure—"the very last one and the clock is ticking on it," he often reminds me—closed the distance in the long-distance relationship we began when I, too, lived in this Four Corners region during a leave from my Indiana University teaching position.

Soon, we hope to return for good, to settle in a spot that's safe for the dogs to run, big enough to pasture a couple of horses, and favorable for an extensive garden. We want an outdoor life: spring camping in the Utah desert, summer and fall pack trips into the Colorado back country. Our retirement dreams focus on setting up a big sheepherder's tent in some remote location for a month at a time.

For me, such a life will be an end point, resolution to a longing I have known since childhood. For Gerald, however, that future is more complicated, for he must attempt to reconcile his desire for the self sufficient life he experienced as a child and still longs for with the changes that time has wrought in him and in this place he still calls home.

The Shearers belong to a group that writer Wallace Stegner calls stickers, people who came to the American West, met the tough challenges of a developing frontier, and stayed. When Isaac and Jacob Shearer arrived in New York from Ireland, they were immediately conscripted into the Union Army. When the war over, they made their way west through Kansas into Colorado and up over Slumgullion Pass to begin a life as hard rock gold miners. They persevered: marrying, raising children, and thus creating a first generation of Shearer stickers. Tax records list the notable possessions of their early life there, a cow and a watch.

As we drive north toward Taylor Mesa, we are surrounded by a rocky, empty landscape, a reminder that to be a sticker in this country, you had to be determined and adaptable. The weather was fierce, the work hard, physical, and often lonely, with monetary reward reliably sparse. But the Shearers stuck it out. Like his ancestors, Bill Shearer pieced together a broad range of proficiencies—miner, cowboy, railroad man, carpenter, trapper, mechanic—to see him through. Rather than a career, he built a way of life.

It's been a long time since Bill last compensated for all his hard work by going up on Taylor Mesa to his favorite fishing spot. Across the years, he and Gerald spent some of the best days and nights of their lives camping and fishing Taylor Creek. Though I have never been there, I have heard the stories. Gerald likes to recount the August afternoon when he stayed too long on the mesa. Lonely summer dusk set in, and with it, wolves appeared to follow him and his string of fish nearly a mile before they prevailed. Though he was armed, he gave up his entire catch, willingly he says, given the choices available. It's a trademark Shearer story, meant to demonstrate the kinds of places they like to go, the inherent risks in their pleasure, and the complex covenants developed between a man and his environment. A sticker story.

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Wind and the roar of the jeep's engine require me to lean up out of my seat, straining to hear the conversation as Gerald and Ruth reminisce. They have an unusual relationship: for twenty years of his life, Ruth was Gerald's aunt, mother to his five cousins and married to Bill's brother Nathan. Then both Ruth's and Bill's marriages broke up, and they came together to consolidate ten Shearer offspring into a single unit.

This double connection of family relationships, the complex network of relatives, is typical of stickers. The work

and the location may have been hard and lonely, but family provided support. We pass by a little draw and sure enough, Ruth remarks on a group of kids, maybe ten to fourteen years old, walking there. Cottonwood fluff catches in the black braids of a tall girl as she smiles and waves. Ruth identifies them. "Those must be your Aunt Myrt's grandkids," she tells Gerald.

"Did Fred have any?" he asks, referring to Myrt's second husband.

"Yes. I remember one day, one of those boys was out working with the men in the west field and decided he just didn't want to work anymore. They said he could quit if he could find his way home, so he took off. I was inside the house, and I could hear him bawling and yelling. Silly kid thought he was lost. But he had family all around him."

We fall silent, everyone thinking of all that family and of days gone by. People gone by, too—Grandma Greta, Uncle John, and, of course, Bill.

Ruth breaks the silence. "I guess I'm not normal," she tells Gerald. "I loved your dad very much. We had a good life together. But I just can't get any talk out of that box. Mary Ann and other women I know who've already gone through this, they set the boxes by their beds, they say. And they talk with them. But not me: to me that box is just a box. My husband is not in there."

I understand. Who could imagine Bill Shearer in a box? He is outside tinkering with an old pickup while sneaking a forbidden cigarette. Or splitting wood for the stove. Or building a table. Or working in his flower garden—gorgeous morning glories and roses—or picking raspberries for jam making. Reading Louis L'Amour in his chair next to the stove. Or sitting at the kitchen table, his blue eyes bright with mischief as he dishes up outrageously large helpings of ice cream for everybody to eat while we examine the trove of family photographs featuring cowboys, dogs, horses, and

solemn people in silent-movie clothing lined up before a rough-hewn house and a sky full of mountains.

"Do you remember hearing about Arnold?" Ruth asks Gerald. He does not. "Well, Arnold was a trapper. He always smelled of skunk." She pauses for a moment. "That sure taught me never to look for love in a magazine," she says, her short grey curls bobbing as she nods for emphasis.

"Grandma Greta was so lonely, you know, after Grandpa Wes died," Ruth says. "But then after she and Arnold met up through that magazine ad, she found out he had been under suspicion of killing his wife. He always wanted to take Grandma out into the woods, camping. She figured maybe he had the same thing in mind for her, so she wouldn't go. And then one day Arnold disappeared. Conveniently. I think your dad and Uncle John were out of town that day. On family business." She turns to me with a meaningful look, making sure I catch her point. I do.

"She lived a hard life. Sure never had much of anything," says Gerald.

"Well now, her trailer house was paid for."

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It's July now; Bill died in May. We missed the memorial service Gerald's sister Yvonne put together, but Bill would have understood. Instead of attending the service for his favorite brother John several years ago, Bill spent the day in the high country, the traditional family refuge, where solitude and solace combine. Our destination today.

With the San Juan mountains still only blue shapes against the brighter blue sky, we turn towards them, north, up the Dolores River Valley. This country still carries the Spanish nomenclature of the early European explorers. They named this river El Rio de Nuestra Senora de las Dolores, The River of Our Lady of Sorrows. I look at Ruth and wonder if she thinks of

herself that way. If she does, she's keeping it to herself. At her request, we break out the graham crackers, bottles of water, and cherries. They are a deep rich red, a worthy extravagance.

As I roll down the window to toss out a cherry seed, we pass a cluster of buildings. "Your dad and I used to come up here every week to listen to country music, maybe three, four years ago. They had a barbeque dinner," says Ruth. "That was one our favorite treats." Then she looks at Gerald. "You used to like country music, but I guess you went another direction, switched to something else."

Actually, Bill's and Ruth's children, just seven of ten left now, quite literally took many directions—to Texas, Alaska, California, Oklahoma—until only two still live in Colorado. They left for opportunity, for adventure, and for solitude, the same siren songs that drew their forbears to this country. Gerald is among them. Across the years, he has been a field mechanic in Utah, driven a truck in Alaska when the pipeline was under construction, and owned and operated a six-bay mechanics shop for truck and trailer repair in Texas. In his middle age, worn down by "mechanic-ing," he returned to Colorado in an attempt to recreate the childhood he loved by buying a little ranch, raising livestock and a hay crop, keeping a milk cow, and putting up the output of an impressive garden.

In sticker style, he diversified by apprenticing as an electrician: economic life here still demands a broad range of talent to survive. In the end, however, tired of scraping by and willing to suspend life in his true home once again, he moved east and found success as a craftsman and designer in Indianapolis where he is nonetheless decidedly homesick. Not just for the country, but for the life he knew there. "I want to live like Dad," he says.

Asked to explain, he can. It always turns on a sense of self sufficiency and the nature of the place. He wants to be

self sufficient. In the mountain west. He wants that free life, hard but rich in adventure and in the solitude that's integral to a lifestyle and place that exists today primarily in his memory.

Gerald's dilemma, the problem of his generation of stickers, is to somehow square his fealty to his background with the limitations and the choices of the present. How does a self-defined working man retain his identity given the opportunity to labor less? Where on the plane of self-sufficiency does a modern sticker locate himself? And how does he keep the old covenants in a rapidly changing environment?

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Bill's world, the life of his generation of stickers, was on display yesterday and the day before when Gerald and I cleaned out the semi-trailer north of the house where Bill had a little workshop. And where he had amassed enough projects to busy himself for another lifetime. Generations of electrical appliances stood three-deep on the shelves. "I guess he figured to fix them one of these days," Gerald says. "It's about the Depression. People who grew up then just can't throw things away. Especially when they have the know-how to fix them."

From the looks of it, Bill had the know-how to fix radios, fans, percolators, lawn mowers, record players and space heaters. And he had the parts to fix them with. Motors of all sizes. Electrical wiring. Fuses and old lightbulbs of every kind, from flashlights to headlights. And nails and screws and tacks and staples and hinges and bolts and washers. All in Folgers Coffee cans. Across two days, we have carried more than one hundred of those cans to the front of the trailer and dumped their contents into the five-gallon plastic oil buckets he also collected. We hauled them, along with all kinds of scrap metal, old batteries, and motors to Belt Salvage where we collected a check for \$130 to take home to Ruth.

We have also made three trips to the dump, all with Bill's old pickup, loaned to us by a friend who bought it—at a steal—shortly before Bill's death. Gerald wants that truck. He's told Ruth to keep her ears open; if it's for sale, he'll buy it. Why? For one thing, it was made in America, Gerald tells me. "And, a man can fix a truck like that." Not only can he fix it, but he can expect it—a 1972 Chevy four-wheel drive—to still be working thirty-five years later. And, of course, it includes custom features: the saddle horn gearshift created by Bill's brother John, the pine gun rack, and the fold-down frame that secures a cowboy hat snug against the ceiling, all marking this truck as Bill Shearer's.

By the end of the second day, Gerald has arranged in the gravel driveway a row of metal contraptions that represent the evolving technology, and ethics, of trapping. He lines them up by size—big ones for coyote and bobcat down to small ones for muskrat. From the most basic jaw traps that intend only to hold, usually a leg, to the newer and more "humane" kill traps. They crush the whole body. "These will sell," he says. "The old-timers will want to hang them in their workshops or on their barn doors."

Bill's parents, Weston and Greta, raised five children in a sheepherder's tent on a desolate piece of land that's still empty, just off what is now Highway 160 near Stinkin' Springs Canyon, not far from the turnoff to Mesa Verde National Park. In the thirties, even while working as a miner and building railroad, Wes Shearer also had to hunt and trap in order to support his family. In the fifties, when Gerald was a kid and Bill was the caretaker for Henderson Ranch, a 2,500 acre spread owned by the Ute Mountain Utes, he, too, ran a trapline.

The family of seven lived in the ranch house while Bill maintained the place all year round, but the Utes paid him only for the months when the livestock—500 head of sheep, 300

cattle, and 80 horses—were pastured there. By late fall, the stock were moved to winter pasture in New Mexico, and then Bill trapped to help support his family.

During one afternoon of cleaning, I reach deep into a shelf, and there, propped against the metal wall, I touch something that feels like a very heavy net. My tugging rewards me with snow shoes, big ones. When I call to Gerald, he nods and stands them up in the narrow aisle. "I used to walk on the back of these, right behind Dad, holding on to him, lifting a foot every time he did, checking the traplines. When I was just six..."

He is silent for a moment. "We'll keep these," he says, and head down, carries them outside to lean them against the jeep. When an antique dealer comes the next day, she wants them; but they will go home with us to hang on the wall with Bill's lariat and irrigation shovel.

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The road is all upward now, our progress slowed by a dump truck hauling a huge semi up this steep grade. We come around a bend and there in the midst of emerald green fields and sparkling water is a dead black cow in the irrigation ditch, all four legs straight up. I am shocked and, unaccountably, reach toward the box, but Ruth just remarks, "That's a big bunch of dollars lying there dead," before going right on with her own concerns.

"I love it up here in all these big trees," she says. "One of these days, I'm gonna come up here and live. Back up in the high country again."

No one responds. We know that Ruth's life in the high country is likely over; before winter comes again she will leave Colorado to live with her son in California. No more snowbound days or weeks warmed by the wood stove, baking bread, cooking whatever's been stored away for this very time, reading books, and working on a jigsaw puzzle.

That's another reality of sticker life: it's hard to grow old here. Stickers come from a long line of tough, resourceful people, but the time comes when they can't shovel the snow or bring in wood to fire the stove. There's no such thing as a company pension. And today, their kids are likely to be gone, not living just down the road with room for another double-wide on their acreage and ready hands to help.

Even stickers who have done a little better, running sixty or so head of cattle and growing their own hay for the winter feed, likely have their own financial troubles and can no longer afford to live up here. The beef industry has changed; small operators can barely exist. So reluctantly, more and more of them have to play their ace: real estate that is sky high in both geographical and financial terms. One by one these ranches are being sold off and divided up into estates for the rich, vacation homes for people from California and Texas that raise property taxes and bring utilities and roads into formerly remote places.

As development spreads up the mountain, sticker families know that there's no new place to conquer. The frontier is gone forever, and so sticking it today brings the challenges of living in town: fencing in your cattle dogs, adjusting to a homeowner's association. It happens fast. And they've seen it before.

When Gerald was born in Telluride in 1954, no ski lifts or timber frame mansions existed there. Bill walked across town in a New Year's Eve blizzard, bringing the doctor back to the row of company houses where the miners and their families lived. Fifteen years later, Joseph Zoline and his Telluride Ski Corporation launched the transformation that replaced miners with tourists and turned local people into waitstaff and maids struggling to find the affordable housing that mine owners once provided there.

Gerald and I try to be realists as we plan our future in the southwest. We have reluctantly changed our search terms for Colorado real estate. We know we can't afford our dream

of building a high country cabin nestled against a forested backdrop. That's where the millionaires live. We will settle for something at lower elevation, and contrary to sticker custom, we will not develop what undeveloped land remains. Instead, we will choose from what's available, probably a fixer-upper on a few acres of pasture. Unremarkable but practical, a place away from town, within close range for camping in both the desert and the high country.

In another twist of sticker fate, Gerald Shearer aspires to spend his high country time in some state-owned campsite in the same last-resort shelter that his grandparents raised their children in: the shepherd's tent.

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We are looking for the turnoff. No name on a sign, just a trail number. Water tumbles down the hillside and under the highway. A stand of white daisies leans out over the stream, their faces spattered by spray. Aspen grow thick along the road, surrounded by something that looks like yellow snap dragons; neither Ruth nor I can name them. Within a few yards of our turning, we encounter a barricade: Road Closed. "No it's not," says Gerald. He shifts gears and we bypass it, climbing onward, the jeep listing and bouncing on the rough road.

"You know," Ruth says, "When we used to come fishing up here, Bill always wanted to camp, not just come for the day. He'd get up early to fish; I'd sleep in. Then he'd send the dog back to wake me up. When I saw that dog face looking into the tent, I'd get breakfast going. There'd always be fish to fry. And Bill had to have pancakes with his fish."

The ammo box full of treasures from our work in the trailer yesterday rattles in the back as we jounce forward on this washboard road. "Look at the size of those quakies," says Gerald, pointing at the aspen. "You have to be up really high to get trees that big."

I lean out the window. Far below, water flows in a deep gorge. And despite the giant dandelions that crowd the road, winter is not long gone up here: the road hasn't been cleared. Around the next switchback, we find an idled road crew, all watching as a big man in overalls bangs on the engine of a stalled grader with a wrench. A young man—flannel shirt, cowboy boots, and a curly beard—walks back to apologize. He and Gerald talk engines until black smoke pours from the machine, the driver moves it out of the way, and we pass them up.

A mile higher, we roll to a stop against the trunk of a downed aspen. Gerald steps out into snow as he moves some branches and tries to assess the situation. Ruth and I drink water but I wish for coffee. I wonder if we will have to walk from here and how Ruth will manage that, but Gerald returns, maneuvers around and over the debris, and we continue to climb.

Just as the road levels out, he slows the jeep and abruptly turns down a little incline, off the road and into a clearing. We have arrived. He silently takes the box from the back seat, carrying it in one hand while he offers Ruth the other. For now, however, she wades on her own through patches of Indian paintbrush and rosy asters, past banks of columbine crowded along a boulder: it's as if an entire wildflower book has been cut apart and scattered through the high green grass.

When the terrain becomes rough, Ruth takes Gerald's arm. We step over downed trees, stop to look at elk droppings, then cross a little stream of snow melt. He points off to his left, and there, edged by blue spruce, is Taylor Creek. We stand for a moment on a little knoll, watching the water leap and play in the sunshine, then Gerald clears his throat. "Dad sure could get to this creek in a hurry. And could he fish! Them little cutthroats!"

At creekside, Ruth finds a big rock to sit on; I'm on a fallen tree trunk. A red-shafted flicker crosses the creek. Chickadees flit everywhere and I can hear a mountain jay

overhead. Sun streams through the branches of spruce and pine that scent the cool air.

"Well, okay then," Gerald says. "I guess Dad and I will take a little walk down the creek." He looks unsure; we have nothing to offer him. Silent, he turns and crosses the stream, stepping from stone to stone, water spraying all around him. Snow lingers beneath the low branches of giant spruce. He does not look back at us but moves into the trees and disappears.

Ruth and I watch the birds. A squirrel, she calls it a tree-topper, chatters at us. We smile at him and that loosens the mood. "I was never sure Bill and I were really married," she says. "It was in a bad snowstorm and everybody was in a big hurry. It went so fast. We just looked at the judge and said, 'I do.'"

"You were married. Two of the happiest-to-be-married people I've ever known. Bill always says he was in love with you from the time he was just a kid," I say, thinking of the photo of Bill Shearer, age 17, sturdy and rakish in tall laced boots, a gun over his shoulder, the photo that makes my own heart thump.

"That was the trouble. He would come around and tease me, and... I could tell. But I was too old for him. He was a kid." She looks downstream and rubs one worn finger across a patch of moss. "We were lucky. Lucky to have each other later, for all these years."

In our silence, the silence of the water and of the wind, time slows. The water rolls over the rocks, its spray glittering into rainbows suspended above the streambed, and the breeze fades to the waft of the azure dragonflies gliding among the unfurling fronds of emerald fern.

Beyond the creek a timeless figure materializes from the misty green distance. The brimmed hat, the broad shoulders, the hand curled over a gnarled spruce staff. Ruth straightens, fixed and alert. And for just a moment, they all converge, layered and transparent as mica within the silhouette: Grandpa Wes, Isaac, Gerald, Uncle John, Bill.

The breeze quickens, the spray dissipates, and gradually the outline is filled in. As Ruth and I watch, Gerald emerges. What we see in that moment, and what Gerald must surely understand, is that he returns from his errand, out of the long family tradition in this place, as the sole Shearer heir, alone in his responsibility to maintain and to shape their evolving sticker legacy.

In the meadow, the sun is a comfort on our shoulders. The asters bend their heads to the drift of our passing. The wind mourns as it moves through the blue tips of the spruce and the winter-greyed needles of the greening pines. Summer is so brief here.

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The trip down is always faster than the trip upward. Over and around the downed tree, past the snowfields, past the laboring men and machine, past the towering aspen and the massed flowers. Soon we can see the county road below us, pickups and cars and an occasional semi straining to gain elevation.

Ruth turns to look at me, all alone in the backseat now, and then at Gerald. "This was really a good day," she says. "Thank you."

To our left, the creek roars downward toward the Dolores River, then on through mountain meadows and horse pasture, swift and clean. Gerald pulls close to the bank, stops, leans out, and looks deep, far past the luxuriant fern, past the golden-faced daisies, into its rocky, mossy depth.

He is so still and for so long that Ruth moves toward him and puts one hand gently on his arm. "Lost something?" she asks.