


# Much of a River

*Marden J. Clark*

 I guess it wasn't really much of a river, only thirty feet wide or so where it had enough fall to ripple over the rocks. Except during the spring runoff. Then it filled and sometimes overflowed a bed fifty or seventy-five feet wide. We knew it was the Weber and that it joined Canyon Creek almost in the center of our valley. But to us it was simply "the river." And it always seemed important on those hot summer days. We would wind, leisurely at first, up through the orchard then around behind the back lots of Morgan, to arrive finally at the widest and deepest swimming hole we knew of, there at the head of the millrace.

Of course we were always running the last hundred yards, with the inevitable "last one in is a nigger baby." (Yes, we used that expression, like everyone else, with a strange blend of ignorance and unaware malice that could sense nothing of how it would feel to a later generation.) We ran, stripping ourselves as we ran. We ran because we were boys, because we always had to be racing, because of rudimentary embarrassment at nudity. We stopped only long enough to finish stripping, then plunged headfirst into water that even in mid-July was chill from its origins high in the Uinta and Wasatch mountains.

I was nearly always the last one in. My short legs had never been able to carry their rather dumpy load anywhere near as fast as Tom Dixon or Harvey Carter or even Blaine Barton, though I sometimes beat Red Williams, who was taller but even fatter than I was. All of them but Red could dive and swim better than I could too — especially Tom, who was my best friend through most of my boyhood years. I suspect now that we were together so much because I fed his ego and he fed my inferiority. Even then I could recognize the beauty of his running dives off the bank and especially of his swan dives and

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somersaults from the board at Como Springs, where we swam in less wild moods if we could scrape up the quarter. He loved the water and was in it every chance he had. He often laughed at my awkward attempts to follow him in one of those dives. But most of the time he encouraged me, even tried to teach me — with appropriate condescension, of course.

He could swim that river, nearly a hundred feet across there at our hole in front of the dam, without coming up for air. I would stand on the bank shivering and admire the strength of his arms and legs moving in beautifully articulated rhythm and propelling him in sharp bursts through the perfectly clear water. Even after swimming that far underwater he would slip to the surface, his arms straight down at his sides, his body slightly arched or perfectly straight, and he would give his head a toss with wonderful élan. I can still hear him calling from across the river, taunting or encouraging as the mood moved him, “Come on, Morgie, you can do it. It’s easy.” Or I can hear almost the same words from the water after he had dived, the perfect swan, from the high platform at Como and left me standing there shivering as I tried to get enough courage to fall off head first: “Come on, Morgie. All ya gotta do is let go.” That *was* all. And I would finally let go, only to feel the water smack my head like a brick and to feel water pressing into my lungs as I sank heavily down and then struggled heavily up.

It was the same when I’d follow him across the river. I could make it two-thirds of the way across in a dogged struggle, but then I’d come up with my lungs burning and my arms flailing, my heavy coughs expelling both water and air. And Tom would stand on the bank taunting, “You can do better than that,” or encouraging, “You almost made it that time.”

But sooner or later we’d settle, all except Tom, to easy swimming or lazy floating. And I could float with the best of them. It was about the only way I was at ease in the water. Tom seldom floated. He would practice diving from the old plank that served as our diving board. Or he’d swim in circles around me. But I loved to just lie there on my back, hardly having to stir myself to keep afloat, looking up at the sky that stretched mountain-valley blue between the great over-arching cottonwood trees that lined both sides of the river at our hole. Just floating. No struggle, no gasping, no burning lungs. I loved it.

I especially loved it on those few days when I had escaped the usual razzing we gave to the last one in, or to any loser — at push-ups or tree-climbing or jumping or any kind of dare-devil, follow-the-leader sport. I don’t think any of us was really cruel, at least not intentionally. But all of us — except the victim — delighted in the razzing. I know that when anyone else had to “run the gauntlet” for losing, I hit the guy as many times and as hard as I could while he was crawling between my spread legs. But I was myself especially sensitive to such things. The extra flesh of my backside made an inviting target but gave little protection from the sting. But it was the humiliation, not the sting, that so often brought first the tears then the sobs from me even though I was nearly always pursued by the same taunting chant:

Cry baby titty mouse  
Laid an egg in our house.

No, I guess I loved the calm of floating more on those days when I hadn't escaped. Something about that quiet peace and the strip of blue framed by gray-green leaves made up for the razzing, even soothed the pain, soothed like the softness of my mother's hand across my forehead.

But such calm in the river was made possible only by an annual spring ritual nearly always carried out under my father's ministering, a ritual that for him was entirely practical, a means of assuring enough water both to run the flour mill downstream and to irrigate our bottom lands in the dry heat of summer. For us, though, it was the real advent of the swimming season, even if some of us had slipped up to Como a time or two. *This* was our hole, our river. As rituals should, it always began the same way. Dad would drive around the barn and up the lane with old Bally and Queen hooked to the flat-bed hay rack. He would hitch the reins to the standard, then call from the wagon, "Come on, boys. It's time for a swim!" We would gather, Tom and his brother from next door, I and my younger brother Rex (already taller than I and still skinny), and sooner or later, Harvey, Blaine, Red, and up to a dozen others who might be within earshot of the call.

The first stop was the string of cottonwoods that lined our river-bottom land. We would pick up logs and branches that were big enough to fill any gaps in the dam. Then to the silage stack at the end of the old faded-red pea vinery, where every summer we wandered from wagon to wagon picking off peas and stuffing ourselves with them. It was a glamorous place for us, with all that hum and clank of machinery from a dozen viners working at once. Glamorous, that is, until our own peas came on and we had to help load and haul them. And glamorous even then if we could get to drive the wagon to the viner, though we would have to struggle to help unload them, feeding them in steady small forkfuls into the viner.

Now the vines were only the discards of the silage, the stack itself long since gone to feed the cattle in the valley. Mostly such vines were dry or rotting, but we knew they would regain their toughness the minute they were soaked with water. With the prospects of that swim ahead, it would take only minutes to load the rack and we would be off for the swimming hole, riding high atop the vines.

I still wonder how Dad could get Bally and Queen to go into that water and stand for the hour or so it would take us to repair the dam, moving only often enough to take the wagon to the next section, the water gradually getting deeper as we would plug up holes in the dam, first with the logs and branches, then the silage vines. Bally was tall and gaunt, hardly handsome by any standards, but Queen always seemed beautiful to me, even up to the time she died when I was eighteen. Perhaps I enjoyed them, too, because they were so gentle, in sharp contrast to Lenny, the fractious iron-gray who had run away with me on the hay rake. I still carry the scar just above my left ear where I bounced off on the railroad tracks.

We didn't mind the hard work, as long as we could splash around in the water, our old pants and sometimes our shoes protecting us from scratches by the limbs while we worked first logs then branches then silage into place. It

wasn't just Dad's dam, it was ours too. Our assurance of a decently deep swimming hole for the summer. So we worked hard. When we would get an especially big hole plugged, we'd cheer and splash and chase each other.

Of course, there'd be a lot of fooling around in such an operation too. As the water got deeper we'd splash each other, shove each other, even dunk each other for long seconds. I didn't like to be held under. Tom delighted in jumping onto my back, twisting me off balance, then pushing me under and holding me there. I'd come up gasping and shaking and scared, sometimes losing the struggle to keep back sobs.

During the summer when I turned twelve, I think Dad must have planned our annual ritual for my birthday. He knew how much I enjoyed the excursion even if I wasn't very skilled or comfortable in the water. My mother had often told me how nice it was that my birthday fell on the longest day of the year, when the sun stood still while spring became summer. We had talked about it that morning, especially about the new responsibilities I would be taking on when I was ordained a deacon next week.

The water was a little higher than usual when we reached the dam. And there were bigger holes in the dam. We had to cut some larger limbs from the cottonwoods to fill the holes before we could start the smaller branches, then the silage vines into the irregular webbing of limbs and branches. But the work went well. Maybe even more fun than usual because of the extra water.

We had worked our way clear across the dam and had settled to more or less serious swimming while Dad turned the team around. The water was above their bellies now and creeping higher. I was, for the first time that day, floating on my back, letting the tiredness seep out. I paid almost no attention when I heard Dad call, "Morgie, come here a minute, you and Tom."

But the second call brought me paddling. Dad pointed to a spot near the center of the dam where the water was swirling in a large circle. Something had broken loose toward the bottom of the dam. Tom dived the three feet to see how bad it was, then came up with that graceful arch of his back. "It's nothing much. Only the silage that's washed out. We'll need quite a bit, though." So we busied ourselves cleaning what was left from the rack and gathering any that floated loose at the top of the dam.

When we had enough, I knew I'd have to tramp it into place — somehow I was always left with the real work. Tom had already joined the others swimming. I didn't like this working against the dam when the water had already reached almost its full height. I pushed the silage down with my hands, then tried to get my feet above it to push it into the holes against the limbs. As I worked, the silage became more and more tangled and of course any that had been still dry became tougher and tougher. Finally I had all the silage down, tramping it into place with my feet.

Tom called, "Come on, Morgie. Let's play water tag." But I kept working the silage. Tom suddenly surfaced beside me — one of his favorite tricks. I had last seen him fifteen feet away. "C'mon," he said. "Let's have some fun." He grabbed me by the shoulders and pushed me hard, down against the dam where my feet were still tangled in silage. I felt the whole mass under

me giving way. I cried out and grabbed at Tom, but it was too late. I gasped as I went under, and felt my throat and chest burning with the water I'd sucked in.

What surprises me every time I remember back is the sense of slow motion once my head was under water. I know I was kicking my feet wildly — or trying to in the tangle of silage. Perhaps I *was* being sucked rather slowly down, though I could feel the water rushing through the hole. And then all at once I stopped, lodged astraddle one of the large limbs that acted as a cross piece between the piers of rocks that anchored the dam. My feet were still thrashing, but slower now and becoming more and more entangled in those tough pea vines, which were still clinging to the brush on both sides of me. I knew I was panicking, if only in slow motion. Crazily I remembered putting lighted punk into the pants pocket that still held a whole package of Fourth of July firecrackers and running madly around in circles when they started going off. Water was what I needed and couldn't get then. I had plenty now.

I could feel Tom and my father pulling at me, but knew they couldn't do anything against those pea vines.

But oddly, the thought of those firecrackers began to calm me. I couldn't run in circles here. And tears would be useless with all that rushing water. I knew I'd have to get myself out or drown.

In my first controlled action, I remember doubling up and exploring with my hands the tangle of vines around my lower leg, the one I'd have to get out to let my body be sucked through the hole above. Then I found myself alternately tearing at single vines and rolling or sliding the mass down my leg, as if it were a tight stocking. It wasn't working very well. But between the tearing and the sliding and rolling, it was working. In that ominous desperation of nearly suspended time just before I blacked out, I felt my left leg jerk free and my whole body start slipping through the hole.

Fishing me out had apparently not been too difficult, in fact, not even as difficult as the time I'd dived straight down off the board into the pond above the mill the year before and stuck my head solid into the sticky clay at the bottom. I don't know which of the older boys pulled me out then. But it was Tom this time. He had pulled himself up over the wired-in piers of rocks and was down into the turbulent water below the dam almost as soon as I was, they told me. He pulled me over to the bank, where his older brother and another boy showed off their recently acquired Scouting skill at artificial respiration. In fact, my first awareness, other than a vague sense of people talking, was of the firm pressure of those two hands pushing hard on my back, then being released. It had only taken a minute or two, they said. And I would probably have been all right even without the first aid. But I was grateful for the birthday present.

When I finally turned over, that long stretch of sky showing between the cottonwoods was bluer and more beautiful than I had ever seen it. It almost cost me my breath again.

Not much of a river. But it had almost got me. I had been under it much longer than I had ever been trying to swim in it. Long enough, Tom said, to

swim across it twice. And I got myself loose. My first impulse when I became aware of Tom looking at me with intense concern and distress was to bawl out, "Why'd ya have to go and push me?" But I didn't. Instead, I felt a strange soft calm settle over me. I smiled at Tom and took his relieved smile in return, then at Dad, then at everyone within smiling distance.

After he could see that I was all right, Dad left me sitting against a tree, and took some of the others to get more branches and silage. I was still weak when they came back, contented just to sit and watch the activity. But the water looked different, and felt different even without my touching it. It had its own force, its own life. I was seeing it with a new respect, even if it wasn't much of a river. I didn't think, though, that I'd be quite so scared the next time anyone pushed me under. And I knew I'd make it all the way across underwater the next time we came swimming.

I was tired when we got home. But not too tired to enjoy the birthday cake with twelve candles that Mother had waiting for me. Dad must have called to tell her what had happened when we went for the last load of silage, because the cake was bigger than any I had seen her make for any of us kids before. Big enough to feed the whole gang, who seemed not to want to go home.