



## *“Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” - Henry David Thoreau*

*By Bryan Dufresne, Bitter Root Land Trust Next Gen Committee Member and Hamilton educator*

1980something, early summer in the Bitterroot Valley. I hear only the whir of my bike tires as I pedal frantically to keep up with my brother, Jeff, who is two years my elder. Black pavement flows by. My left hand clutches my handlebar and a net. I look up at Jeff who also holds a net on the left handle bar, on the right hangs a five gallon bucket. We are headed down College Street to the north in the direction of the Lee Metcalf Wildlife Refuge. Our destination is a series of small cattail ponds just beyond the Vance’s place.

Tires eventually skid to a stop. We lay our bikes down, and wade into the pond. The hunt begins. We read the water for frogs, looking for eyes popping above the surface or some sign of movement.

Jeff and I play all day, until hunger pangs and dinner beckons. We bike home at a much slower pace, my brother wobbling to and fro because of the weight of the now full bucket.

Home, 319 Spring Street in Stevensville. Bikes on their sides, tires still spinning, we hustle to the front door. It’s Mom that comes to the door first, and her eyes grow wide as we

gleefully show her our day's work. Our new pets, somewhere around 20 frogs, swim in the five gallon bucket. My father joins her at the door.

While staying excited about our day of exploration and our bubbling childhood exuberance, Mom and Dad counter with, "You can keep them for one night."

We erupt in protest: "We love those frogs! We worked all day to catch them! They are our pets!" - and Jeff and I receive the first lesson of stewardship that I can remember.

*If we loved those frogs, then it was our job to take care of them. They wouldn't be happy or healthy living with us. The frogs belonged in nature. When you truly love something, you do what's best for it.*

My Bitterroot childhood was remarkable, full of unfettered freedom thanks to an abundance of natural space. As I grew into a teenager my playground shifted from bike trails and frog ponds to the Bitterroot River. The river was extraordinary on every level; the joy was infinite. We inner-tubed, snorkeled, swam, fished, floated, caught crawdads, jumped off bridges, launched off rope swings, hung out, and painted a masterpiece of teenage joy at the river.

I can still feel the biting cold of deep snow on my bare feet as we giggled, hooted, and hollered our way to the railing at Bell Crossing for our annual polar plunges into the frigid waters below.

I can still feel the sense of summer awe when we came to realize we could lift a heavy rock, wade into the river until it was over our heads, and literally run across the riverbed holding our breath until we emerged on the other bank.

In adulthood, when faced with the daunting task of being a father for the first time, it was this valley that saved me once again. As soon as he could walk, my son Finn and I were trekking the Bitterroot River with our border collie, Whit. A few years later, my daughter Lila began joining the journeys and has been addicted to water ever since. As a family we have played, wandered, hiked, biked, fished, camped, walked, swam, skied and snowboarded up and down the Bitterroot Valley.

The two greatest friendships I have ever known were forged on the banks of the Bitterroot River. Friendships that continue, nearly forty years later, to be fed and strengthened by time on the river and in nature.

Life has an interesting arc, if done correctly. You find something you love, and you immerse yourself in it, sometimes recklessly. As the relationship between you and the thing you love grows, you come to realize that you have been blessed, immeasurably. You then work to

nourish and protect that which gives you so much joy- for when you love something, you do what's best for it.

My stewardship began on a micro level: adhering to no trace ethics when backpacking and camping, recycling, fishing barbless hooks and keeping fish wet, taking a garbage bag on every fishing trip to pick up trash left at the river. Enter the Bitter Root Land Trust, and a chance at stewardship on a macro level. A chance to impact everything about the valley that has blessed me for 50 years: clean air, clean water, abundant wildlife, open space, and the remarkable playground only nature can build. Beyond the palpable, a chance to impact the ethos of those of us who are lucky enough to live here.

The Bitter Root Land Trust has, in many ways, preserved a scrapbook of my life.

At the 2023 Bitter Root Land Trust barn dance a memory came flooding back to me as I stood next to the Severson pond and gazed toward the house and the Sapphire Mountains beyond. In the 80s, I once traded baseball cards with Ethan Severson in the upstairs bedroom that looks out upon an endless sea of open space.

In elementary school, my brother and his childhood friend Steve Lewis used to make pilgrimages up Burnt Fork Creek in search of brook trout and happiness. Life long friend Keith Seppel moved to the Stevensville area in the 80s. In a new town, in a new state without a friend to call his own, Keith discovered Burnt Fork Creek and fished, swam, and flipped rocks to his heart's content. Now, thanks to the Bitter Root Land Trust, darn near the entire upper stretch is preserved.

And there's the Bitterroot River itself. The Bitter Root Land Trust has not only helped safeguard clean, free flowing water, but has opened public access on stretches of the river that were once private. Skalkaho Bend in Hamilton is an in-town oasis of natural splendor, wildlife, and river song. Up the West Fork, the Ben White Memorial preserves the section of river that was Ben's childhood playground. I taught Ben in junior high school in Darby. Every time I float or fish that section of river, my mind shifts to him. I connect to once fleeting memories and enjoy his smile and free spirit while I follow his childhood footprints.

The valley has changed immeasurably in my lifetime. The Bitterroot is magical after all, and I blame no one for wanting to live here. Whether you are a fourth generation western Montanan like myself or an out of state transplant escaping the hustle and bustle of some booming metropolis, we share the same love for this place. The Bitterroot Valley's open space, fresh air, clean water, abundant wildlife, outdoor recreation, and natural splendor are inexorably tied to that love. And when you love something, you do what's best for it.

BRLT's latest endeavor is a combination agricultural land easement / public park on the Groff property near Victor. One of the goals is to preserve the town's historic sledding hill for future adventures. It's almost storybook, really, preserving a childhood sledding hill so laughter and squeals can echo through the trees for centuries to come.

I have a hard time putting to words what this valley means to me. Day in and day out, it heals me. Thanks to an open lands bond and a remarkable partnership between land owners, the Bitter Root Land Trust, generous donors, and community minded volunteers, the place we love stands to heal us all for years to come.