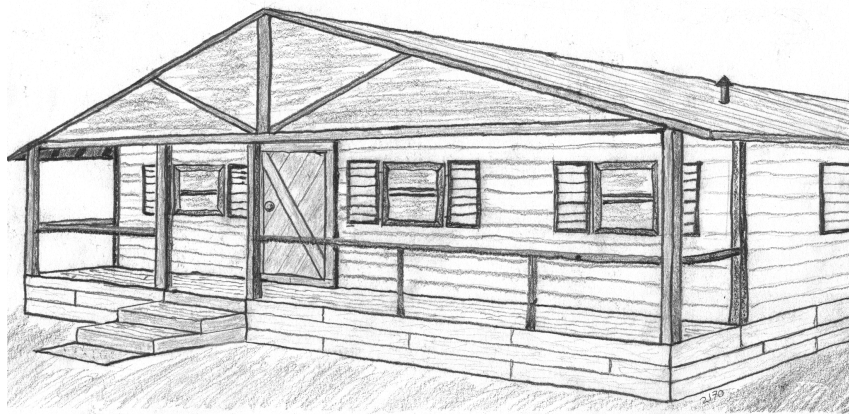


Lay of the Land



[Arrival]

Sunday, 19 Nov 2017

It is late afternoon on a crisp, cold winter mountainside in the Sierras. The sun is bright just above the western horizon, and almost a foot of snow covers the ground. It is quiet except for the sounds of the forest animals accompanied by the creaks and groans of the trees as they are swayed by the breeze. Then, in the distance, an engine and mechanical whirring nudge into the tranquility. The source of the ever-increasing engine sound and accompanying mechanical whirl is a UTV with snow tracks. As the vehicle makes its way up the four-wheel drive path, snow flies from every corner of the motorized beast, creating a wide path through the otherwise undisturbed, smooth, frozen fluff.

Sam drives his UTV to the endpoint location on the GPS, stopping in front of an old miner's cabin. Satisfied that this is his destination, he parks near a wooden rail that appears to be an old hitching post in front of the cabin. The cabin is an old wooden structure built in a cutout on the mountainside.

Sam is astonished at the impeccable preservation of the building and its longevity. The report he read several weeks ago stated that the cabin was built in the early 1870s. Its condition suggests that it has been maintained well over the past one hundred forty years.

Three steps lead up to the covered porch, safely enclosed by a wooden pole railing. Consistent with the cabin's construction when it was built, the three windows in the front of the house have large, solid wooden storm shutters. Sam finds it curious that the large wooden door has no window. He figures there must have been a reason, as a few reasonable options fleet among his pondering – Safety from gunfire or arrows, expense, or perhaps, to prevent interior lighting from revealing the cabin's location at night.

Beyond the cabin is another building, an old but equally well-maintained barn. Sam dismounts from the UTV, removes his helmet and unzips his coat. He takes a few steps toward the cabin; the snow growls at each step as it is compacted by Sam's boots. He smiles and shakes his head in amazement at the excellent condition of the one-hundred-fifty-year-old structure.

Verbalizing his thoughts, Sam quietly exclaims, "Wow! That's amazing." As he moves about, Sam hears the breeze through the trees and the crunch of the snow with each step. Pleased to hear the rush of wind on the wings of a flock of birds as they pass several yards overhead, he briefly laments that the sounds of suburbia mask the subtle sound of nature to the point that one might think birds make no sounds as they fly. The wide open spaces, fresh air, and encounters with God's wild creatures are the intangibles that call Sam to the wilderness with increasing frequency.

In sharp contrast to the raw, bold, and rustic freedoms of nature he sees in the large valley below him, Sam takes out his cell phone that ties him to the modern world of high-tech. Of course, in a remote area guarded by restricted use rules, there are no cell towers, so he has no service.

Sam, again, vocalizing to himself, "Figures." He then chuckles about himself and the paradox of his situation. He's happy that he is out in the wilderness but disappointed that there is no cell service in the middle of nowhere. At least he has satellite communications for backup.

Using his phone, Sam takes a couple of pictures of the cabin and then a few of the snow-covered valley a hundred feet below. He then stows his phone, removes his hydration pack, pulls a satellite communication device from one of the pockets, and turns it on. While waiting for the GPS to get a reasonable lock on his location, Sam wanders toward the valley for a better look. Once the device beeps, he sends an OK message to his wife and the boys.

Sam, still speaking to himself, "At least they'll know I made it up here and that there's no cell service. Oh well, better check it out." Pleased that his device shows that his message was delivered, he puts the electronics away to enjoy the solitude of the wilderness.

As he gazes down into the valley, Sam takes a deep breath of the cool, fresh air. Being a retired fireman, the smell of smoke immediately triggers his brain into investigation mode. He takes another sniff to analyze the type of fire.

Sam utters, "Hmm, smells like manzanita and oak smoke. Someone must be clearing some brush."

From behind Sam, in a calm, reserved voice, Wac ih a' inquires, "Do you always talk to yourself?"

Startled, Sam spins around quickly. His left hand extends toward Wac ih a', as his right hand reaches down toward his right hip, where he carries his concealed revolver.

Wac ih a' is an elderly, tall, thin man with Native American features. He is dressed in standard cowboy clothes but wears a '70s-style leather vest with fringe. He also wears an amulet around his neck. The amulet is a rounded triangle made of what appears to be one lobe ruby, one emerald, and one sapphire, seeming to meld in the middle to a diamond. A gold ring encircles the amulet.

Sam, realizing there is no threat, exhales exasperatedly, "Whew. . . You startled me."

Wac ih a' speaks formally and in a staccato pace, "A bit jumpy, I see. Well, you won't need that just now." He nods toward Sam's right hip. "I suppose you are here about the property."

Sam takes an easier stance and lowers his left hand, recovering from the surprise. "Oh, uh yeah, Hi. My Name is Sam Reynolds. I'm sorry for the intrusion. I was led to believe that no one was permitted here."

Sam reaches out to shake hands.

Wac ih a' raises his hand past Sam's and puts it on his chest. "I am Wac ih a', and this is my fifty-second year as the caretaker here. The Creightons asked that I continue to look over the property until the ownership fight is over."

He then lowers his hand to meet Sam's in a shake.

Sam, pleased that he wasn't left hanging, "Nice to meet you, Mr. Wac ih a'."

Wac ih a', in a soft but matter-of-fact tone, "No 'mister,' just Wac ih a'. I will be pleased to take you around the property tomorrow. Come on in. I'll get you some coffee."

As they walk toward the cabin, Wac ih a' jokingly says, "By the way, your nose is much better than your hearing. Seems like a bear could have walked right up and hugged you before you noticed him."

Sam replies, "Yeah. Hearing loss is an occupational injury from my previous job."

"Oh, I see," replies Wac ih a'. "By the way, you are correct about the manzanita. I'll add it occasionally to reduce the creosote in the stove. We use wood for all heating and cooking - there's no gas or electricity here except a portable propane tank for the fridge. The power lines are less than a half mile away, but power can not be extended here until after the restrictions are lifted."

Sam sees his UTV and baggage. He points at the UTV, "Since the cabin's already occupied, it looks like I'll have to make other arrangements."

"No. Not at all," Wac ih a' replies, "It is only me here for the next two weeks. My wife is vacationing out of state, and there is plenty of room for guests. She and I usually come up a few days a week to ensure everything is in order, but I've been staying here since October. A few uninvited trespassers have been on the property in the past few weeks, probably due to the increased interest created by the hospital." He waves Sam toward the cabin. "We'll get your belongings later. Watch your step, especially with the snow and ice; that first one can be something special."

As they head into the cabin, Sam notices that the first step is a flat, icy shale stone. In one of the corners, there is a chiseled stylized **R**. The other two steps are made of wood and have no special markings.

[The Cabin]

Inside the cabin is the main dining/living room with a large, plain dining table that can seat eight. A wood-burning Franklin stove is near the wall on the right, between two doors that lead to bedrooms. The furnishings are sparse but well-kept. There are windows on the left wall (North) and the wall by the front door (West). All the windows have exterior and interior shutters.

Several oil lamps are hung on the wall lamp hooks, spaced around the main room. Two oil lamps are also on the dining table. A mat is near the front door, and a rug is in front of each of the two rooms off the main room.

Bedrooms are through either of the two doors near the Franklin stove. The bedroom closest to the front door has a window to the porch (West), and the other bedroom has a rear window facing the mountainside (South).

Just beyond the main room is a kitchen separated from it by walls that only poke into the opening a short distance (six to eight inches), like a three-sided window frame. The kitchen has a wood-burning oven/stove, cupboards, a work table, and counters. One counter has a hand pump and basin. A coffee pot, kettle, and iron skillet are on the stove. Another oil lamp sits on the work table in the middle of the kitchen.

There are three doors off the kitchen. The farthest door in the kitchen (East wall), opposite the front door, leads out the back toward the barn and outhouse. The other doors are on the right (South) wall. Of these, the farthest goes to a third bedroom. This bedroom has a window facing the barn (E). The other door leads to a small anteroom with a bathtub, and a door from there leads to the pantry/root cellar built into the mountain.

Wac ih a' goes to the kitchen stove and gets the coffee pot and a couple of tin cups. He carefully pours the coffee on the way back to the table, "Make yourself at home."

After removing his boots, Sam enters the cabin and checks it out on his way to the table, taking note of the solid wood interior shutters and door. He thinks to himself that the cabin is well fortified against attack. He wonders if the fortifications are due to the unsettled times when the cabin was built or if the fortifications are intended to help keep out the winter cold. Maybe both?

Sam pulls up a chair at the table and picks up the coffee that Wac ih a' poured for him. Wrapping his cold hands around the warm cup, he deeply breathes the intense aroma, "Thanks for the hospitality, but I haven't even told you why I'm here."

Wac ih a' sits at the table after turning one of the chairs to better face Sam. Leisurely, he places the hot coffee pot on a trivet and sips from his cup. "I'm pretty sure you are here on behalf of the Creighton family. I was told a representative might come up."

Sam knows this property has attracted much attention and will likely have had several interested parties try to get a first-hand look. He wonders why Wac ih a' determined that he would be working for someone instead of being there for personal interest, and he also wonders who the Creightons might be.

"How so?" asks Sam.

Wac ih a' explains, "I saw two trespassers up here last week. They poured something through the snow and marked the area. The following morning, someone from an environmental company came and collected the dirt from where the chemicals were poured. Anybody trying to be clandestine, but that stupid must be working for Wilson. Over the past month, I've seen others who were also secretive in their visits. You are the only one that seemed to have permission to be here."

Trying to clarify who he is working for before getting too deep into the other parties, Sam explains, "Actually, I'm here on behalf of Mr. Owens. I'm not sure who the Wilsons or Creightons are."

Wac ih a' furrows his brow for a second, then draws a line of connection between the parties, "Of course! Miss Creighton married into the Owens family back in the 1870s. The Owens family administers the Creighton Foundation. My family has been caretaking here for the Creighton Foundation for several generations. That's why there is a name mixup." He pauses, then matter-of-factly states, "Unfortunately, the Wilsons are still the Wilsons."

Sam is faced with another variable: 'The Wilsons.'

Still working to get all the puzzle pieces in place, Sam states, "I thought the other major party interested was a big ranch near town called the Bar R Bar. Their lawyers have pressured the judiciary to remove the restriction and declare the owner to be the Bar R Bar Ranch. Is Wilson another major player?"

Wac ih a' smiles as he is confident he can clear Sam's confusion about the primary players, "No. They are one and the same. Mr. Thadeous Wilson owns the Bar R Bar, among other properties in the area. Wilson Land and Cattle Company is the parent company. It's based out of New York." Wac ih a's tone becomes sarcastic: "Thadeous is the reigning patriarch of the same family that started this whole mess." Losing the sarcasm, he continues, "I'll fill you in on the details as we ride the property tomorrow. You do ride, of course?"

Not knowing exactly what Wac ih a' is asking, Sam replies confidently, "Absolutely! ATVs, UTVs, motorcycles, and snowmobiles: Almost anything." In an attempt at humor, he adds, "I am even pretty good riding rollercoasters."

Wac ih a' chuckles and smiles a warm, fatherly smile as he watches Sam sip the coffee. Sam confidently smiles back at him, expressing true enjoyment of the hot, dark beverage without a clue as to what was just asked. Wac ih a', feeling slightly sad to disturb the fifty-year-old's youthful ignorance, asks, "What about a horse?"

Sam's expression falls instantly. His confidence is shaken, and he is embarrassed about his bravado and overconfidence. "Umm. Well, it's been a while. Maybe 35 years."

Wac ih a', with barely a moment of thought, sums up the situation, "I'll put you on my granddaughter's horse. He's very gentle, and we'll take our time." He looks out the window and sees that it is getting dark. "You best get your belongings in. You can put your snow machine in the barn. And if you want to wear your boots in the morning, you might want to bring them inside. Critters love to tear 'em up. Even when they're frozen."

Agreeing, Sam stands, "Yeah, I suppose I better get my stuff. With these short days and the mountains to the west, it gets dark rather early." He finishes his coffee and puts the cup on the table. "You notice it more when you're not in the street lights of the cities."

Wac ih a' gets up and walks over to the window, looks toward the sky, and informs Sam, "In two days, we'll have a full moon. It is usually bright enough that you don't need any lights; however, the weather forecast says a little storm will be coming through. Unfortunately, it will probably hide the moon most of the night."

Sam nods in understanding. He goes out the front door into the cold, dark night and finds his boots frozen, as the host had eluded. After struggling to get them on, he goes down the steps to the UTV. Sam slips on the bottom stone step, which is still covered with snow and ice. Surprisingly, he doesn't fall as he flails about like one of those advertising, fan-powered stick figures. After regaining his balance, Sam continues toward his snow machine. Looking back at the step, he shakes his head and mutters sarcastically, "Somethin' else, huh? Seems more like a broken neck waiting to happen."

Once in the driver's seat of his UTV, Sam takes a moment to take in the stillness of the night. Out from under the influence of the porch's overhang, the nearly full moon illuminates the countryside in a blue-white light that reflects off the snow and twinkles in the tiny ice crystals clinging to the branches of the trees.

The silence of the night is shattered by Sam starting his UTV. The pale blue light is defeated by the bright white LED lights of the UTV - serenity takes a back seat to technology and modern convenience.

Sam drives his UTV around the north side of the cabin toward the barn. En route to the barn, Sam is reminded of the hardships settlers endured as he spots the outhouse behind the cabin, about halfway to the barn. Attached to one side of the outhouse is the woodshed, which is about three-quarters full. He estimates that to be nearly four cords, probably enough to last until early spring.

Arriving at the barn, Sam rolls the large door open just enough to get the UTV inside. After a glance around, he backs the UTV into the barn and quickly shuts it down. The sound of the UTV stirs the horses that were once quietly napping. Annoyed, the horses move restlessly in their stalls. Sam apologizes to the horses gently and calmly, "Sorry, guys. I didn't mean to startle you. Get some sleep; I'll see you tomorrow." He then takes his bags off the UTV and, trying not to disturb the horses more than necessary, gently rolls the huge barn door closed.

On the way to the house, Sam hears a great horned owl, and although trees mostly block the view, Sam looks over the valley. It is tranquil. The slight gurgling from a nearby creek mixes with the occasional sound of a gentle wind gust hushing its way through the forest. In the distance, to the west, a glow can be seen from the towns and cities far away. Red lights flash on the top of a transmission tower a few miles to the west, and a plane's lights float silently aloft as it transits the sky.

Sam appreciates the property's serenity so far, but how it can be transformed into a satellite hospital while retaining this atmosphere is a mystery to him. Furthermore, what evidence for ownership does either party have, or will all ownership rights be invalidated and the property put up on the open market? A cold wind gust that rushes past his face allows him to understand that the elusive answers he seeks will not present themselves in the frigid outdoors tonight.

Sam turns from the view of the valley and goes into the cabin through the back door. He kicks the snow off his boots before slipping them off outside but taking them inside, leaving them by the back door. He places his food bag on the kitchen table and then takes his other bags to his room; his room is the one with the window to the porch on the west side of the cabin. Wac ih a' stays in the room off the kitchen.