

# HO HO HO

I had a real hard time starting the Xmas letter this year. Normally I like to begin with a famous quote that most people don't know so I feel smarter than everyone else, and once the conceited smugness sets in, I sip my iced coffee and just let the words flow like the broken sprinkler head that I meant to fix in the yard this summer but never found the ambition. Clearly the wasted water cost less than my oh so valuable personal time. Time that I used instead to binge something on Netflix which I had never heard of and will not remember. But this year is different. Not the normal highs and lows to compare and contrast and joke at. It's been like listening to a homemade mixed tape with early Dolby stereo and filled with bands of the 1980's. Just that heavy exhausted, worn out, tired, sort of melancholy feeling hanging over and sticking to everything. So after spending a few agonizing minutes picking out the perfect Xmas stationary to mirror this mood, I decided to soldier on and channeled my Inner Dave. My annual holiday tome must go on.

2021 was a big year for Nancy, as it is her last full year of work. Come next August 1<sup>st</sup> she is logging out of Liberty Mutual forever, and not letting that imaginary door smack her on the butt on the way out. She has been thinking of this for quite a while, and in preparation took and passed all of her tests to be a realtor. Yep, she has aligned herself with a brokerage that has been happy to take her on, and does home showings and open houses as her schedule permits. She doesn't have the time to fully commit to this new endeavor yet, but come next summer I expect she will be handing out business cards by the millions and I'll be changing the oil in her car more often while she makes those dreams (and nightmares) of homeownership come true. Of course, Nancy has also kept up with her volunteering for the high school booster club in addition to the Spokane Valley theater. And when you throw in her annual trips to Cabo and Palm Springs this year, along with a couple to Rhode Island and Cali, plus some road trips to OR to visit friends, I guess you could say that the Vid cannot keep a good woman hunkered down.

Same could be said of Mitch. Now halfway through his second year of college at Eastern, it has been fun to watch his growth. He is still following a Communications path, but we all know the LAST thing anyone really knows at that age is what their path is (let alone where it is going). But he is finding a lot of things along the way. Like how to live with roommates. His first year was in a single dorm room, this year with three other guys. Which brings up questions like 'who is eating my food?' and 'why is the sink always full of dishes?' The best part is when he calls out some of the other guys for basically living like pigs, which makes me smile. I recall the many years I never saw floor of his bedroom because it was covered with dirty (and clean) clothes, or the countertop in the bathroom piled high with endless perpetual clutter of hair products. The most important thing he is learning this year is how to make his bed, do laundry, shop for food, and cook. All of the things parents cannot teach a teen. Outside of class, Mitch also keeps his hours filled. Not only did he take on a role in a Spokane Valley theatre production, but has been putting in a little coin in his pocket with good old fashion work. Last summer he was a cook at a local family restaurant, where the owner took him under his wing with good instruction and kitchen know how. He also learned about nepotism, and just because the owner has his son managing the business it doesn't make him a good manager. Back at school he's been doing delivery for a sandwich shop to keep the dollars in the bank account. And, with the rise in numbers allowed for social gatherings, he was finally able to hold the Court of Honor for his Eagle Scout completion. It was heartwarming to see him formally recognized for such a great achievement. Again, nice give the Vid the middle finger when you can and live a little normal in these pandemic times.

Jaclyn has been ... well, Jaclyn. Independent and doing her own thing in Seattle. Continuing to work for Blue Origin, otherwise commonly known as 'Jeff Bezos's space company,' she is enjoying her work and taking the world on with her own terms and tenets. She and her boyfriend, Pat, have financially consolidated living costs and now shares a rental house in one of the most egregiously expensive rental markets in the world. And they added a puppy to the mix just because to you can't let life get too simple. I've seen about a billion pictures of Bobbie now thanks to Google sharing, but we don't mind because Nancy is kind of jonesing for a dog these days as it has been a couple of years since we lost Cassie and have never been dog free for this long. Anyway, Jac has been spending a lot of time at the Blue Origin launch facilities in Texas, some drop ins with Pat's clan in NY, and several other locals far and near as a lot of her friends are in that wedding cycle which tends to hit the young professional demographic she is in. It has been a long time, but I do remember the carefree years of renting when I was a young strapping lad. However, there is something to be said for peaceful Zen of Lawn Mowing and the meditative Toa of the Oil Change.

As for Dave, it was an interesting year. Especially to be a commercial driver. I'm no longer at the bottom of the school bus seniority list, but that list is much shorter now. We all got our pre-covid routes back, so it was good to finally see 'my' kids again. But when I look at the sea of face masks, constant sanitizing, and the not-socializing protocols, it is clear the students are all very tired. Weary. Beaten. Broken. No twinkle of mischievous youth in their eyes. Just hollow thousand-yard stares. Of course, those of us in transportation are the same. You hear 'critical shortage' everywhere, but for drivers it is unimaginable. My route is stretched so thin that I have students that sit at the school 45 minutes AFTER the dismal bell rings; that is as soon as I can get there. Our Admin staff is getting called to backfill routes every day. It's not uncommon to have all dispatchers, route planners, trainers, and even shop mechanics out behind the wheel any given AM or PM run. So when you radio in with a breakdown or an accident with a bus load of kids, there is no one to come to the rescue. Just sit and wait and dial 911 if any medical issues arise. We have had sports teams forfeit games for lack of a bus, and admins calling parents in the morning/afternoon saying their student has no transportation. That's why I signed up to drive summer school this year. They really needed the bodies and my job at Glacier Park fell thru (AGAIN) this summer (I was hired back as a Jammer but with covid restrictions there was no shared housing thus no job). But as driver shortages persisted, Glacier called me back about the first of July and offered me a driving job. A pretty horrible one at that (most likely the reason it was still open so deep into the short season). Basically, I would drive and employee shuttle van up and down a 30 mile stretch of road near the west entrance half a dozen times a day between 3:30p and 12:30a. Oh, and then fuel and wash the van afterwards in the middle of the night for a whopping 11 bucks an hour (less room and board naturally). Bonus: live in a very run-down RV park that resembles a South American French penal colony with a roommate rumored to be a retired serial killer. Really? Are you kidding me? OUTSTANDING! I took the job. The best 62 days of my life. But for that story you will need to read the supplement to this letter.

That's about it. Not as witty as seasons past, a little gloomy. But just blame it on the Vid like everything else and move on. As always, wishing you and yours the very best for Christmas and the Holiday Season.

## The Wing Family

Nancy, Dave, Jaclyn, Mitch & Figgy

# The Mountain Man Review

Been a couple of years since I've done one of these. So get settled into a comfy chair and put on your favorite holiday snuggie. This might take a couple of sittings to get thru.

Started off in January with the 25<sup>th</sup> annual SnowCamp. This year found us returning to Winthrop and the magical Methow Valley. Instead of cramming six guys in an unheated cabin/garden shed in the back of a pretty nasty trailer park (like the last time were where here), we put eight old white dudes in an Airbnb house with a net zero carbon footprint and outstanding views. This annual gathering has come a long way over the years, and obviously we have all climbed a couple of rungs up the economic ladder and can afford some creature comforts (like heat and a bathroom). Great company, clear skies, full sun, amazing snow, and COOOLLLLLLDDDD. Even with all the sun it never got above high 20's in the day, and at night dropped to -5F. The nice thing about that kind of cold is it your whiskey doesn't get watered down with too much ice. Stays nice and cold on it's own. But be careful not to let the tongue stick to stainless steel of the Yeti high ball thermo.

Since my Jammer job at Glacier fell through, I kind of wanted a little GNP fix so packed up some friends the day after school was out and we drove up to camp a few nights at Bowman Lake in the northeast corner of the park. It was a nice early season outing. On the way home, I saw I got a call from Glacier Park. The transportation guy said he was sorry the jammer thing fell thru, but he had another driving job open if I was still interested in working in the park this summer. So began the Summer of Dave.

Now I have recorded this odyssey in pictures and a LOT of written narrative in a Facebook page that Nancy set up. I spent the summer adding to it in real time almost daily. If you aren't a Facebook person, I'd advise to just create a dummy account (trust me it's worth it). Search for "**Dave's Glacier Adventure 2021**". Nancy will accept anyone and everyone into the group. You will laugh, you will cry, and more likely than not might even pee your pants (just a little). I'm not going to try and recap all of that here, but I would like to throw out some stats and share a few fresh insights from what was truly and amazing two months.

Yeah, the shuttle job was horrible. It was the turd in the proverbial punch bowl. So much so that everyone they had assigned to it only lasted about a week before they found something else or just plain quit. But it was the perfect means to get to my personal end. My passion is hiking and climbing, not driving some employee shuttle van over 250 miles a day while transporting and average of 1.8 people per shift. But this mindless job meant that if I just grabbed 5-6 hours (turned into 4) of sleep after 'work', I still had 8-9 hours of prime daytime hiking before my next shift. Being able to hike DURING a workday was the game changer. Then my 'weekends' could be saved for the 20-mile monster hikes and more distant peaks. I knew that I would never get a chance like this again. A meaningless zero effort job with endless hiking options. I knew that every road I had traveled and every step I had taken in my life had brought me to this moment. There was never really a choice.

It's been 35 years since I've done seasonal work. They threw me into employee housing that was incredibly substandard. Xanterra, the concessionaire for GNP since 2014, has gone to the RV park model. They buy cheap maintenance-deferred seasonal RV parks at the fringes outside Glacier and turn into employee housing only. Then fill up the run-down cabins with transient rootless type workers like me, a shared kitchen, and shared bathroom. The camp's population was a mix of younger kids, some older like me, and even a couple of families. But most were hard-core seasonal employees that migrate from place to place every few months following the sun or snow or whatever. Xanterra then courts and woos retirees (who aren't there for the money) to take management jobs at the hotels for the summer and provide full hook ups for their spacious (and very self-contained) RVs. Giant fifth wheels and more than one million-dollar Class A motor coach (many actually landscaped their sites for the summer with bark, flower baskets, lawns, and gnomes). A very clear delineation of the haves and have nots that did not mix. Don't start me on economic class disparity. I couldn't ask for a better social experiment in which to become immersed. This was just a great big sweaty epic slice of what I like to call Americana.

I came in with a three-prong approach for my short Montana summer. A) start with heavy trail miles to get my legs back and sweat down the belly roll. B) move to elevation gain with off-trail scrambles and familiar climbs to get my

lungs back. C) EXPLORE! Trails, waterfall, mountains, places I had never been because there was never time. Yet time was very finite, and not to be wasted on the mundane like grocery shopping/laundry/hammock naps. Two months is too short, and I would need to hike every single day (the weather and the body permitting). The first week was a painful one. Breaking down while building up is never easy, and I didn't have the luxury to ease into it. Truly amazing what the committed mind can make the body do. I constantly planned my hiking schedule four to five days out, while keeping complete flexibility and a very detailed log. No day was to be wasted or squandered. Hiking was literally my full time job this summer. No distractions. Completely out of the comfort zone. No longer coasting on autopilot in the wagon wheel ruts of life. This experience would be whatever I made of it. Full control of a blank slate. Empowering. Scary.

So how did it all turn out? My contract only went to Labor Day because of the start of the school year, so I got in just 62 days as a 'shuttle driver' in the park last season. In that time, I was able to rack up 456.1 miles with a bone crushing gain and loss of 114,814 feet. I was also able to get my skinny ass up on 21 peaks, with just over half of them personal first ascents. On the surface that equates to an average of 7 miles a day with 2000 feet of gain. But if you carve out the 20 down days I took (some by choice, others by my body telling my mind to f\*\*\* off and stay in bed), well, yeah, things got a little crazy. At least that's what the other employees kept saying. I didn't go into the summer with any kind of mileage or peak count goal, I just knew I had to take advantage of this once in a lifetime shot to hike in my most favorite place on earth. After clearing over 100 miles in the first six days (and... On the seventh day I rested; slept for 17hrs straight and almost missed my afternoon shift), I knew this was going to be a big summer. Another number is the 233.1 hours of solo hiking/climbing time. That is a lot of time to be aware and absorbed by your surroundings. Appreciate the rich flora, observe the magnificent fauna (whose only interest is putting on winter weight). Watch the colors and hues change with a passing cloud. Smile at the stormy contrast of an August snow heavy on the needles of an old growth cedar. See the wind ripple across a mountain lake pulsing like a heartbeat. That's also a lot of time to think. To access the really deep thoughts, the ones only solitude can bring to the surface once the static of daily life fades away. Such solitude in nature provides one the rare opportunity truly see their priorities in life; to literally feel the clarity between the important and the trivial. Such solace can be overwhelming. Definitely cathartic. Clearly healing.

I came home with a much more intimate understanding of the park. So many great experiences in the mountains. My only regret is the price it came with (other than losing a lot of sleep and some toenails). I did miss out on the social aspect of seasonal work. Given I was basically working a night shift and everyone else on days, there was not a lot of overlap for hanging out with my fellow 'parkies' (yeah, their words, not mine).as I would have liked. All the individual backstories of what brought people to the park and where they had been and where they were going are just so truly awesome. I spent most of my free time writing in the common areas to be around that raw energy and enthusiasm that can only radiate from young adults at that stage of life. So much rich writing material. These vibrant youths don't allow the problems of the world to beat down on them. They are not distracted by the false absolutes society tells them they must accept, and rely on their intuitive understanding of what really matters to them. Throw in the seasonal transitory factor and there is an unmistakable refreshing vibe that just makes me smile. Even during this pandemic thing, these kids (as I called them) were happy to be living their lives and refused to buy into anyone or anything telling them how they should feel.

So that's what I did last summer. I let myself be absorbed by my true passion in life, which I recognized as not only a gift but an opportunity that so few people get and fewer have the courage to grab and not let go. I clearly admit this was the hardest thing I have ever done, physically and mentally, at any stage of my life. I'd like to think I could have pulled something like this off in my 20's, but I know I did not have this kind of discipline, determination, or commitment. And I even regained some of the optimism from my youth. Back when everything was still new and the world was there to be explored, not to just lived in and watch tick away day after day. If I could only share one take away from this experience it would be that happiness, at least for me, is to be an active participant in life and not a bystander. To see and breathe and feel the world around you. Treat every experience as something new, enjoy it, then seek the next. Oh, and stay away from grizzly bears. Those things are terrifying in person.

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