

# High on the Edge

Stress and Pleasure  
Along the Corridor

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DENNIS PENCE

**A**nxiety gnawed—which seems to be happening more often in my later years than in the past. My thirty-year-old son Nick and I had agreed to drive the Magruder Corridor from Red River on the Idaho side to Darby, Montana.

It was supposed to be a fun trip. Not one filled with stressful thoughts of breakdowns and flat tires in the middle of the largest wilderness area of the Lower 48. I have a nineteen-year-old pickup with a lot of miles on it, and my tires had only fifty percent tread left on them. I rationalized that the pickup was well maintained and was shod with ten-ply tires, plus I would take two extra spares, so we shouldn't have any problems. Which did nothing to relieve my anxiety.

The Magruder's reputation preceded it. I had heard horror stories of astronomical tow bills and not enough spare tires. My neighbor recommended doing the trip with an ATV or motorcycle, though he qualified this with, "A high-clearance pickup can do it okay, but an ATV would be better."

Of course I couldn't confess my fears to Nick. After all, I'm his dad. We've always had a good relationship and can talk about anything and everything. But even though he is thirty years old, I'm supposed to be the strong one. Or something like that.



FAR ABOVE: Dry Saddle is the highest point on the main corridor road.

ABOVE: The author's son Nick with guard dog Sadie.



FAR ABOVE: Bargamin Creek, alongside which Poet Creek Campground can be found, untouched by wildfire.

ABOVE: Green growth reclaims the forest after wildfire.

So why the anxiety? I love to drive Idaho's backcountry. Steep, rough mountain roads with few turnouts don't bother me. Nick is the best mechanic I know, with an excellent aptitude for anything electronic, including modern electronic engines. I remembered some of my antics when I was younger than Nick, with no caution whatsoever. One time I drove without mishap from Anchorage, Alaska to the coast of Washington in a rice-burner pickup that was firing on only three of its four cylinders. I never gave it a second thought. Was fear casting its ominous shadow in my older age?

I have a philosophy that I'm not always good at following. Feel the fear and do it anyway. So, I loaded the truck with the camping equipment, a toolbox, the two extra spares, and a chainsaw just in case a windfall blocked our way. My wife Teri chided me for the chainsaw, and for being so cautious.

On a bright Friday morning, with our six-pound Chiweenie dog Sadie for protection, we were on our way—but not before Teri warned that we needed to protect Sadie rather than the other way around.

After topping off our gas tank at Elk City, we drove fifteen miles or so to Red River and began the Magruder Corridor. Somewhere between Mountain Meadows Campsite and Granite Springs Campground, something strange happened. We stopped to take a few pictures and enjoy the view where last year's fires had burned much of the landscape. Nick commented that the view was



excellent because the fires had opened up the country. Fire is nature's way of rejuvenating the wilderness. Some green growth was again starting to reclaim the ground. Deer tracks wandered through the burned sentinels that were once green trees. Then the strange thing. With startling clarity, I discovered I was no longer stressed. In fact, I was on a natural high. The Idaho wilderness tends to do that to some of us. A sense that is undefined but not unwelcome envelops one's being. For a moment, I felt transported to a different time. A caravan of native hunters mounted on Appaloosa horses traversed the Southern Nez Perce trail across the mountain meadows of the high country on their way to the buffalo hunting grounds. A pack train laden with supplies for miners made its way on the same trail to the gold fields of Montana. The unseen wind spanned the generations on its eternal quest.

I snapped back to the present. I'm not sure why this happens to me, but it frequently does in the Idaho backcountry. Only when I'm alone, though, or with someone special like Nick, and away from the noisy interference of civilization.

Driving for miles down a steep, brake-heating hill, we came to Poet Creek Campground, a veritable oasis

amid a forest blackened to various degrees by wildfires over the last few years. This greenbelt along Bargamin Creek somehow had escaped those fires. We observed trout swimming in the creek and, in turn, were inspected by one of the locals, a big buck deer. Apparently, he approved of us, as he wandered on without so much as a look back.

We spent a pleasant evening enjoying hamburgers, coping with mosquitoes and campfire smoke. Life doesn't get much better than this: Idaho wild country with a history. Rejuvenating forest side-by-side with mature green trees along a lovely creek. Trout swimming in the crystal clear water. Wildlife. Quality time with Nick and our little dog Sadie Lady. Sleeping in a tent. What more could I ask for?

When we drove away from the campground the next morning and ascended another steep hill, I felt as if I had left something behind. A part of me wanted to stay at Poet Creek Campground with its pleasant greenbelt and meandering waters. But onward and upward. Literally upward. And up. And some more up. Into very rugged, rocky, mountainous terrain. The road got considerably rougher, too, although it still was nothing a high-clearance vehicle couldn't negotiate.

The vista at Dry Saddle, elevation 7,920 feet, was awesome. Looking out, I wondered whatever possessed those of yesteryear to risk life and limb on this route to Montana for that elusive yellow metal known as gold? I tried to imagine what it was like, but the feeling eluded me this time, because civilization's noise intruded in the form of a half-dozen pickups, a few motorcycles, and a couple ATVs on the saddle. This was the only location along the corridor that we ran into more than a couple people or vehicles at a time, and I wasn't complaining. They had as much right to be there and enjoy it as we did.

The road, if it can be called that, descended from Dry Saddle for miles down another brake-heating hill—with no turnouts, nada, none. We edged by a couple of motorcycles going uphill in the opposite direction. The last driver informed me that an SUV was following not far behind them. I eyed the road skeptically. The cut slope on my left was solid rock straight up, and the fill slope on the right was solid rock straight down for several hundred feet. The road was barely a pickup truck width. No wonder the forest service brochure we carried warned that this section had few places to pass another vehicle.

We eased down the hill in

low gear, watching for the SUV. A quarter mile below us, we spied it advancing at a brisk clip. If I drove that fast on a road like this, my old pickup would fly apart. Of course, when we met, I was on the drop-off side of the road. At least here the road was a little wider—all of a pickup-and-a-half width. I seriously considered backing up but couldn't remember how far back a wider spot was. Might be miles.

I edged out to the edge, no pun intended. Nick must have been looking out at empty space from his perch on the passenger side but he sat there calmly, as if ice water flowed through his arteries. What was it that I said previously about the anxiety being gone? My guts tightened and a butterfly fluttered in the pit of my stomach. I could have sworn our pickup was listing toward the cliff.

"You're all right, you've still got half a tire on the road," Nick informed me, a nonchalant look on his face.

The SUV, its right tires partway up the bank, started to edge past. When our driver-side windows were even, he stopped. He and his wife wanted to chat. We seemed to list a little more toward the brink. What a friendly couple. But then, the drop-off wasn't on their side.

Finally, we passed each other. You couldn't put a

toothpick between us, but we made it. Plus I left the butterflies there. Or so I thought.

Dark thunderheads were gathering and when we came to the vicinity of Observation Point, a few raindrops splattered on the windshield. We took a breather, walking up a short trail to a peak just to see what was down the other side. Another magnificent view of an alpine lake at the bottom of a solid rock draw greeted us—along with heavy rain, and thunder and lightning.

Techie Nick had his phone out, taking pictures. "Hey," he said, "I've got three bars of signal here."

"What?" I couldn't hide the doubt in my voice. "Clear out here in the wilderness? We must be fifty miles as the crow flies from a cell phone tower."

Before I knew it, he was in a conversation with Teri. "Yes, Mom, Sadie is okay. Don't worry about her."

Noisy civilization. I felt intruded upon here in the wilderness. I always look forward to being out of cell phone contact, and even though I hypocritically carry a cell phone, I often tell Nick and his sister, "I'm waiting for the day a strong wind comes along and blows down all the cell phone towers or EMPs, whatever they are, and puts them out of commission."

My thoughts were

interrupted by a lightning flash, and what seemed like a split second later, a clap of thunder. A little too close for comfort. "Nick, you've got to hang up. We should get off this peak with all this lightning." The butterflies had caught up with me. I started counting the seconds between the lightning flashes and the boom of thunder.

Ten steps from the top, he lost the signal. Much to my relief.

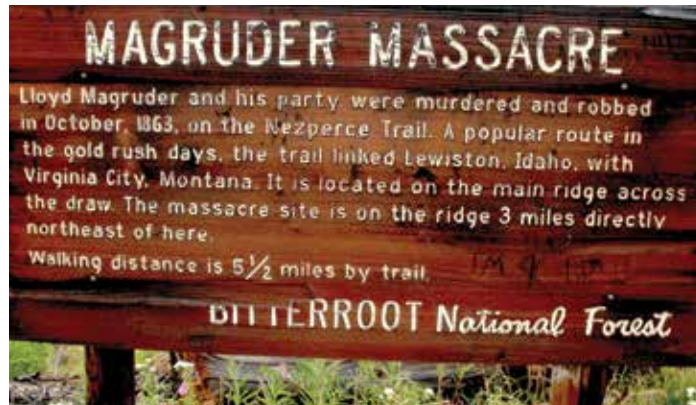
We dove into the pickup, trying to escape the downpour. "Last year at this time the countryside was burning up," I remarked as I started the engine and turned the heater on.

The rain fell and the wind blew as we came to a sign dedicated to the corridor's namesake, Lloyd Magruder. My mind involuntarily slid back to 1863, when he and his companions Charles Allen, William Phillips, and brothers Horace and Robert Chalmers were murdered and robbed. Melancholy settled over me as I recalled what little I knew of the horrendous act. Rain driven by the wind through the open window into my face brought me back to the present, but even here in the warm confines of the pickup, the melancholy lingered. Which was not at all unpleasant. "The happiness of being sad," Victor Hugo wrote. I understood what he meant.

When we were almost at the Selway River crossing, we rounded a corner and a blowdown from the storm blocked the road. I grabbed my chainsaw and in a few minutes reduced the windfall to a pile of firewood. I felt vindicated. If we were back on the peak where there was a cell phone signal, I would call my lovely wife of thirty-five years and ask her again if I was being overly cautious. The chainsaw had ensured our passage out of the wilderness, I thought smugly.

We couldn't leave the Selway without a visit to the historic Magruder Ranger Station. On the way, we crossed a masonry bridge whose architecture rivals that of ancient Rome. Perhaps I overstate, but I was impressed. Deep Creek Bridge was built in the 1930s of native stone cut by Lithuanian stonemasons and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) enrollees. It was a pleasure to look at. The location of the ranger station is idyllic, with the river rushing by, the old buildings, some of them made of logs, and the meadow that horses grazed in a bygone era before their next pack trip into the high mountains.

After another agreeable evening by the campfire—even though it was more wet smoke than dry flames—we retired to our sleeping bags. I lay warm and snug with little Sadie, listening to the rainfall on the nylon tent. It had been an enjoyable trip, good dad-son time, with Sadie to protect us from the wolves and bears, all in the Idaho backcountry I love. My old pickup had performed flawlessly, without so much as a flat tire. I brushed the side of the tent with my arm and it came back wet. The inside was almost as wet as the outside. This tent camping can be overrated, I thought. Unless, of course, it's dry weather. ■



FAR ABOVE: Deep Creek Bridge, built of native stone by Lithuanian stonemasons and CCC enrollees in the 1930s.

ABOVE: Trailhead to the site of tragedy for which the Magruder Corridor was named.