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American Scene

In Idaho: Living Outside of Time

Twice a week in the warm months, twice a month in the cold, a pilot named Ray Arnold ferries mail and sundries to people who live so far back in the mountains of Idaho that it sometimes seems the sun sets between them and the nearest town. To many of the people along this route, that nearest town is Cascade, where Arnold Aviation is based. There, in a cheerful office off to one side of a hangar, Arnold's wife Carol receives shopping lists from the backwoodsmen on her

One cat at the Allison ranch, for instance, won't eat anything but Purina."

Ray had a passenger, a young bearded fellow named Hal who was going to be caretaker of a University of Idaho research station where wildlife patterns are studied. "Might as well put in another sleeping bag," Ray said. "If something happens, I sure don't want to sleep in the same bag with you."

The pilot had one last cup of coffee in the office. It is one of those offices adorned



Ray Arnold unloads supplies at White Water Ranch, one of his stops along the Salmon River

short-wave radio; then she does all their marketing. These goods are flown to a breed of Americans who choose to live outside of time.

"Now, how many was that on the pitted black olives?" Carol was saying into her radio one morning when the temperature was 10 below.

"Two jars. And a fifth of Christian Brothers brandy and a fifth of Dark Myers's rum. A small container of nutmeg and two quarts of eggnog."

"O.K., got it." Taped to the wall above Carol's desk was a marching line of signed blank checks collected the last time Ray made the rounds. The customers trust the Arnolds, with good reason. The Arnolds are their contact, their cablehead to civilization. So intimate is this bush network, Carol can calculate the state of marital relations in the mountains by the quantity of condom orders, though she chooses to push this intelligence out of mind.

In the hangar Ray was loading the plane. Four dozen eggs. A case of Old Milwaukee. A case of Budweiser. A roll of roofing tar paper. Cat Chow. Meow Mix. Grape-Nuts flakes. Bread. A broom. "Some of them out there are brand conscious," Carol said. "Some are quality conscious. Some you just know what to get.

with chummy signs: DO YOU WANT TO TALK TO THE ONE IN CHARGE OR THE ONE WHO KNOWS WHAT'S GOING ON? The people of Cascade (pop. 1,000) hang around here as the people in small towns in warmer climes do around certain gas pumps. They waved Ray Arnold off as he taxied away on skis.

There have been times when the weather socked the pilot in and the mail run had to be postponed for up to five days. But this day was so clear you could almost see tomorrow. The Salmon River Mountains were below. The way the snow caught the sun, the snow looked like diamond dust. Off the starboard wing the Sawtooth Mountain Range made a ragged platinum horizon. Down canyons, through passes, over peaks, the Cessna with the skis affixed to its wheels threw a shadow that caused elk, long-horned sheep and mountain goats to bolt. On the control panel Arnold has tacked a sign: IF YOU WISH TO SMOKE, PLEASE STEP OUTSIDE.

In Idaho, skis and risk have always been a part of mail delivery. In the 1880s, carriers used 11-ft. skis to get over the high passes to reach the miners' camps. Three carriers died in avalanches. A fourth froze to death, his bag jammed with Christmas mail. Arnold has crashed twice, once

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when the wind shifted wildly over a jury-rigged runway and put him into the trees. The second time, a crack developed in the exhaust system, carbon monoxide leaked into the cabin, and the pilot passed out. The plane's premature landing, fortunately, was again cushioned by the trees.

Both aircraft were total losses. The pilot walked away from the first, cracked a vertebra in the second. What is more, the Federal Aviation Administration cited him 13 times for the second crash. Among his wrongdoings, said the FAA, was flying too low. That was a hard charge to dodge, since it is difficult to keep your nose up when you are unconscious and going down. In the end he enriched the FAA by \$400.

When it is not possible to land, Arnold drops the mail, employing passengers, if he has any, as bombardiers. He orders them to open a window, makes a pass at the lowest FAA-permitted altitude of 500 ft., yells, "Get ready . . ." and then explodes with "Now!" When the drop is dead on the money, as it often is, the involuntary first-time mail bomber gets a rush not unlike the sensation one associates with having just saved the Republic.

Arnold's own personal rush comes from the warmth of his customers. They need him desperately, after all, and when they hear his plane they are out on their makeshift runways, pulling sleds, flashing blinding smiles. On this route the mailman is always invited inside. A couple who wish to be known only as Newt and Sharon baked him a cherry pie on this particular visit. Sharon makes her pastries with bear fat. They talked of the six otters they had seen outside in the Salmon River that morning. Newt tore through his mail, furiously writing checks as he went. "This is one of the few places where the bills are late before they get here," he explained. "Computers don't understand that."

At the University of Idaho research station, Ray had dropped off his first passenger and picked up Jim Akenson, who had been studying cougars and elk but was now "coming out" to visit family. People along the Salmon River, the River of No Return the pioneers called it, speak of leaving or returning as "going out" and "coming in," or "leaving the river" and "coming to the river." Jim had known Newt and Sharon by radio for 30 months but had never met them. They live 65 miles apart. "You don't look the way I pictured you," said Jim.

"Neither do you," said Sharon.

They spoke of "going out." Sharon said that this "has been a bad year. Everybody on the river has had to go to town." She said that she had had to have her teeth attended to and that Newt had got sick. "Newt hadn't been to town since December 1980. We hate to go to town."

The mailman left with two steelhead filets Newt wanted him to pass on to a neighbor miles away through the wilderness. He would be back that afternoon to drop off a fresh-killed elk another neigh-

bor wanted Newt and Sharon to have. All along the route this day, he would be transferring gifts, books, food, goods and good wishes between these isolationists. It is a service not set down in his \$20,000-a-year contract with the postal service. "Oh, I take it out in trade," Ray said. "The weather could ground me, and then I'd have to stay overnight with them, so I stay on their good side."

At the next stop, a woman named Frances Wisner, a south Texas telephone operator who settled on the river in 1940, sat waiting with her German shepherd under a lean-to. She wore more layers than a



Groceries for Sharon and Newt

high-society wedding cake. She gave Ray Arnold a meat-loaf sandwich, a cup of steaming coffee and a piece of her mind. She said it might help the federal deficit if they placed higher taxes on every soft drink but Coca-Cola, which she drinks, and every candy bar but Milky Way, which she favors. Around them, gathering dusk turned the day and the canyon blue, the way it does on snowy landscapes.

Ray Arnold flew home with a full moon rising. He had covered 550 miles. The people he had seen are not hermits in the real sense, not even xenophobic (they chatter all day on their radios; they welcome strangers who accompany Ray), so much as they are shot through with old-time ornery independence, misfits with a thing against clocks. To understand what drew them here, one need only remember those maps where population density is shown by clusters of black dots—each dot representing 100,000 people, say—on a white background.

On a map like that, the corridor between Washington and Boston looks like a great oil spill at sea. By contrast, Idaho, because of its configuration and lack of residents, looks like an alabaster chimney with only a few smudges. Idaho, the popular saying goes, "is what America was."

—By Gregory Jaynes