

For such a time as this

Thad, The General, and a few good teens...

“Everything happens for a reason”. Indeed, big floods like the one in Colorado in the fall of 2013 happen because it rains. A lot. As to it constituting an identifiable and deliberately carried out step in some larger divine narrative or plan, I don’t think so, but that is not the point of this story. In fact, I am just going to relate events as I know them to have taken place and let the reader take from it what they will. I will try to convey the story somewhat chronologically, but of course I am reassembling all of this from information gathered in a very non-chronological way. It should also be kept in mind that this recollection as presented here has been impacted by a certain amount of memory decay as time has passed.

This is a story of a remarkable God who created some remarkable people and then when the time was right, caused their paths to come together so that they found themselves joined together for one unforgettable week in the summer of 2014.

For a logical starting point in this sequence, I chose August of 2005, when hurricane Katrina struck the gulf coast, smashing the levees and flood walls and disabling the pumps of New Orleans. The resulting carnage killed 1800 people and destroyed countless lives, homes, and neighborhoods. Selected because of my limited knowledge of the entire sequence of all the life events of the key players in the saga, this was the oldest common point of origin I could find.

It is uniquely in the wake of such human tragedy that heroes manifest. I can’t prove it, but I believe that most such heroes remain anonymous, a fact which of course makes their heroism all the more worthy of the term.



And so, it is in New Orleans that we pick up the life narrative of the most remarkable hero I have ever personally met, (and in the process render him no longer anonymous, sorry 😞) “Thad”. His last name and his heroics prior to 2005 (despite repeated inquiries) were not revealed to me and therefore apparently not relevant to this tale. His image probably appears in the dictionary under “renaissance man” as he could make the best Chicken Alfredo you ever tasted with a side of mouth-watering Irish curd bread topped off with a rich cheesecake for dessert, then get in a backhoe and work boulders around in a mountain stream bed to build a cascade of stone platforms from which to enjoy the sunset over a magnificent cathedralic rock formation that just happens to shoot into the sky just across a glorious Colorado mountain pond. Or he could continue his work on an art studio complete with a bathroom that had a shower head jutting out of the exposed granite of one of the Rocky Mountains, discuss classical literature, or describe the time he ran some vandals off at the end of a sawed-off shotgun.

Thad had been volunteering in New Orleans with the demolition and reconstruction of homes for several years when in 2012, the drought and heat in Colorado came together to create some of the worst range and forest fires ever experienced. Many homes were left in ashes and sometime in 2012 or 2013 Thad, sensing his work in Louisiana now complete, set out for the front range of Colorado in his old white jeep.

Back home in Minnesota in September of 2013, we (youth and leaders from Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Rochester, Minnesota) had returned from another great Group Workcamp mission trip (to New York) and were beginning to plan for summer of 2014. With strong interest, it looked like we had another great team forming for what would be our 13th summer of Group Mission trip adventures.

We had our list of sites narrowed down to two or three possibilities, when we started hearing some rumblings about repeated thunderstorms in Colorado. Starting on the 9th of September and lasting for several days, it seemed like the rain was never going to stop. A cold front from the north had met the seasonal monsoonal flow from the gulf of California, causing the conflicting air masses to violently resolve things just to the east of the Continental Divide. Especially intense on the 11th and 12th, some areas got as much as 9 inches on the 12th, with a total of up to 17 inches by the time it was over on the 15th. In mountains like the Rockies, water dives quickly down the slopes and fills the narrow canyons and valleys, gravity then forcing these huge volumes into very narrow gauntlets, causing already swift-running streams to become unfathomably large roiling tidal waves of destruction. Boulders, cars, houses, water heaters, and all things in between come ripping downhill, and nothing can stop them.



In the canyon of the North Branch of the Big Thompson river, things were the worst. The Big Thompson itself runs through the city of Estes Park (at the base of Rocky Mountain National Park), downstream from which the North Branch joins it before heading into the Big Thompson Canyon on the way to Loveland and points beyond. The canyon of the Big Thompson from there to Loveland is extremely tight, with high vertical walls. Along the North Branch, the canyon alternates between narrows and wider valleys. In both canyons, the deluge wiped out the roads in enough places to make travel in the canyons impossible. In the canyon of the North Branch, a normally gently curving highway used to wind its way along the water, and now there simply was no road left at all. Utility lines, trees, culverts, rocks, and other debris lay in twisted piles that stretched on for miles and miles.



About 5 miles up the canyon from where the North Branch joins the main Big Thompson is a ranch owned by the second main character in our story, Ann. Ann is a spry, feisty, stubborn, intelligent, and highly motivated woman over 70 years old, who lives in a splendid 19th century ranch lodge made from huge timbers and full of large, stunningly gorgeous western and more specifically Native American artwork, blankets, and more. A gigantic dark wooden table with huge leather and oak chairs sprawls across the enormous dining room where you can still hear the echo of early wranglers as they discussed their latest cattle drive over steaks and beans.

A former and current corporate director, Ann had purchased the ranch with her life's savings, and with the help of a nearby son, raises grass-fed beef for sale (Some time ago, she placed the ranch in the "conservation easement" which means that it becomes a state park upon her passing).



The ranch is located at spot where the canyon opens up after a long narrow run downstream between mountain ranges. When the first wall of water hit the ranch, it was 30 to 40 feet high and filled with cars, water heaters, a couple of mobile homes, and thousands of tons of boulders, rocks, sediment, trees, and a lot of dead things. The ranch's corrals and everything in and around them were wiped from the face of the earth in less than an afternoon, and due to the location at the bottom that long run of canyon, replaced with an immense and deep expanse of twisted rubble, debris, rocks, and sediment. The ranch's cabin, located higher on the hillside, was spared as was the life of Ann and her son. But safe in the cabin, Ann was nonetheless completely cut off, miles from help now that there were no roads left anywhere close.



Back in Minnesota, still oblivious to Ann and Thad, we watched the news and saw the shocking videos from Colorado as things grew worse. There was nothing we could do. Yet.

After the aforementioned fires, Thad, a gentle, soft-spoken man in his 40s, found himself working on the front range with Habitat for Humanity. He and a crew were in the middle of a complete rebuild of a house just over the ridge to the east of the canyon of the North Branch of the Big Thompson when came the torrents. Once the water had subsided somewhat, Thad and a friend loaded up backpacks with supplies and equipment and started up the canyon on their own private search and rescue operation. This amounted to an exhausting miles-long scramble up and over boulders the size of cars, fording high water (all at an altitude of over 7500 ft), and dodging live power lines and ruptured gas pipes. When they came upon a home still intact and occupied, they used a satellite phone to call in a helicopter to rescue occupants. Where occupants had already been rescued, the pair ensured that gas and electricity were shut off to prevent more trouble when things came back online.

Eventually reaching Ann's ranch, they called out from across the water and debris, and she answered. For a while, they called back and forth above the din of rushing floodwaters, arguing about whether she would be plucked from her home; Thad and his partner eventually prevailed, and the chopper came and lifted her to safety, an outcome that probably still riles her up to this day.

Miles downstream where the river meets civilization in the city of Loveland, the flash flood waters were free to spread out and find the quickest way down to wherever they were going. The damage of course went with them.

At Group Mission Trips headquarters in Loveland, things were already in motion. Their founder, Thom Schulz had been there for the last bad flood on the Big Thompson, in 1976. In fact, the very first Group Workcamp was the one he had organized in the summer of 1977 to help with the recovery from that flood. Group headquarters was eventually built on the lot that was used for staging of rescue and triage for victims after that event, which killed over 200 people.

In Minnesota, I kept in contact with friends at Group, discussing the likelihood of a disaster relief Workcamp being organized for Loveland. In November, Group Mission Trips announced the anticipated camp (which would be funded by Group themselves) for the following summer. I registered our group of 25 eager youth and adult leaders immediately, and our preparations began in earnest.

Meanwhile, FEMA was on the ground quickly in Colorado. Every available hauler was contracted for debris removal, and work quickly began; of course the first order of business after search and rescue was to get some semblance of roads built, since so many people were dependent on those arteries for survival. Roads were reestablished in remarkably quick fashion, but months of debris removal would follow.

Our team in Minnesota was spending the school year fundraising and preparing for the journey. Our veterans realized that this one would be like none of our previous 14 or 15 trips, as our first "disaster recovery" workcamp. Most workcamp sites are organized years in advance, and are fairly predictable in terms of the work, with home repairs such as painting, porch and ramp building, and other similar projects. This year we were told to expect just about anything, from debris cleanup to drywalling, to who-knows-what. As leaders, we had always used the phrase "Be Flexible", drilling it in rather relentlessly through the years. Now we were really going to see if it had been taken to heart.





Our hero Thad meanwhile, after getting to know Ann via the shouting match across the canyon, had found the next stop on the voyage that is his life of service. In addition to the monumental damage from the thundering floodwaters, Ann's hired hand had run off when the floods hit, and there were horses and cattle to be located and rescued - literally endless work to be done. Fences were non-existent in the valley, but high pastures were mostly spared, and that is where the surviving cattle and horses were found. These had to be rounded up and moved temporarily to the pastures of a generous neighbor whose ranch had been left unscathed by the deluge.

Thad either decided to stay, or simply never decided to leave.

Once enough space in the valley near the Cabin had been cleared of debris, an RV had been parked where part of the corral once was, and Thad moved in for the duration. Somewhere along the line, Thad convinced Ann to purchase an older medium-sized backhoe/loader and a dump truck that could hold perhaps 15 yards of material. Thad got to work, loading the truck and time after time, dumping it where things were washed away, a project that would take months and months, just to rearrange a small fraction of what the flood had moved in mere hours.

As spring approached, our plans continued to solidify for the mission. We would travel the first night to Seward Nebraska, where we had stayed at St John's church and school on several trips to the west. My cousin Elizabeth (recently retired as a teacher) has been instrumental since 2002 in helping get our teams accommodations for travel. The long journey across the rest of Nebraska would follow the next day.

We have learned over the years of doing Workcamp trips to be sure to include a couple of days of bonding and recreation on the way to our workcamp destination, since I believe if you cannot play together, there probably isn't much else you can do successfully either 😊. Where possible, I have tried to find something adventuresome; in mountain regions, whitewater rafting has always been a favorite activity. We have rafted the Snake in Wyoming, the Arkansas in Buena Vista Colorado, the Colorado river in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, two rivers in SC whose names escape me, the Oconoluftee in North Carolina, and twice we have, like the song from *the Old Crow Medicine Show* says, baptized people in the New River of West Virginia.



On our Colorado trip then, how could we not find a river to explore? We settled on the Poudre, a borderline wilderness trip where few other boats would be on the water as trips were limited.

Summer came, preparations were finalized, and at last our caravan of trucks, vans, and trailers set out on our journey on a Thursday morning.

Our trip across Nebraska was about as exciting as you are probably imagining it was.



But once we entered Colorado, the questions started coming: When will we see the mountains? Are they big? Why is it so far between rest stops? Are we there yet? In all seriousness, I have had the joy to be there when many, many teens have seen sights such as the Rocky Mountains for the first time, and it NEVER gets old. As we approached Loveland where our campground was, the weather was cooperative and the plains of Eastern Colorado provided us a fantastic, slowly clarifying and enlarging view of the snow-capped mountains of the Continental Divide. The kids were ecstatic!



We arrived at our campground on Friday evening (Workcamps start on Sunday afternoons), just outside of Loveland. The kids moved into their cabins and then of course set out to explore and play. During a frisbee session in a meadow near the campground, I was transported back in my mind to my first trip anywhere with a youth group. When I was 17 years old I was spending the summer working on a farm near Dodge City Kansas, and was generously invited along on a camping/retreat trip with the youth group from (ironically) Holy Cross Lutheran Church to Rocky Mountain National Park. On that trip, we also been tossing around a frisbee in a glorious temple of rocky steeples, when as I watched wispy clouds scrape their bellies across and finally over one of the spiraling peaks, I encountered God up close and personal for the first time. I hoped and prayed that now, having been guided back to the same location with now 20 teenagers in tow, they would experience something similar.



On Saturday we set out for the Poudre. Now I knew the water was going to be cold, but I probably should not have asked how cold. 39. Fahrenheit. And the river was up; we were in for 2 hours of non-stop category 4 action; I hoped we would not be baptizing too many that day. After the usual warnings about “summer teeth” and the “trout sharks”, we set out on the bus, eager for a day of adventure and probably a cool dip. We shivered with anticipation.



It turned out to be an awesome day, and we only had one person go overboard (an Adult!).

That night around a beautiful fire and the Colorado night, we sang, prayed, and talked about the week ahead. The veterans did their best to calm the nerves of the first timers and we went to bed.



Workcamp at last!

Sunday around noon, after the obligatory stop at Waffle House, the caravan pulled into the school in Loveland that would be our home for the next few days.

Now if you haven't been to Workcamp, it is difficult to describe the feeling of arrival. You have made it! And the redshirts will NOT let you forget! Horns honking, people everywhere in klatches of brightly colored matching tee-shirts unpacking, helping other groups unload, groups of 2 or 3 guys or girls milling about, hoping to make new connections with those from exotic places (like Omaha); red shirted staff poking about, helping check in campers, showing group leaders where all the important camp locations (such as showers!) will be...

We arrived, checked in, did our first Get Down dance, and met our crews (On my writing bucket list is a much more descriptive tale of our Workcamp adventures, you can look forward to more details on how things work in that story, but that is not the focus right now 😊).



My crew for the week would consist of myself and the 5 teens I just met, including Lindsey, Grant, Sydney, and two others the names of which are recorded in synapses that are unavailable for access at this time. As is the custom, we met together on Sunday night, read through our assignment details, and got pretty excited when we learned our destination would be a ranch well up into the mountains, in the canyon of the North Branch of the Big Thompson. We all wanted to see the mountains, and now we were going to be a part of those mountains for a week!

As “Crew 3” arrived at what used to be a pretty nice cattle ranch in the canyon of the North Branch of the Big Thompson river in Colorado, our hero Thad was busy loading bucket after bucket of debris, boulders, trees, and sand into the dump truck. As the truck filled each time, he would shut down the backhoe and take the truck to be unloaded somewhere else on the ranch that had been washed away by the raging torrents. Having not yet talked to anyone at the ranch, we did not realize at the time that he had been doing this for *months*.



We pulled up, unloaded, and were wondering where to go on the sprawling grounds, when bouncing down the hill from the cabin came Ann, ready to put us to work (We would later find out that Thad had long since rechristened her “The General”, which we instantly realized was the perfect moniker. She made “suggestions” and Thad provided the solutions. And she made a *lot* of suggestions).

Our first task was to continue the job of digging various plants, trees, and other things out of the muck and rocky debris, now hardened from months of sun, and the guys all eagerly grabbed some of the shovels and other tools from my truck. Ann *sprinted* back up to the cabin for more.

At first, Thad was reluctant to say much, and in a somewhat piecemeal fashion, we got the story that some volunteers had showed up a while back, and their impact left a lot to be desired. So at first he would stop to talk for a bit, but never said much about himself, why he was there, or how he came to be there. But of course once

crew 3 set to work clearing debris, cleaning up, replanting grass, and other rather dirty tasks without complaining, he and Ann both were impressed enough to really open up to us and share more about what they had been through. And Ann started making some plans for all of us.

Those plans resulted in a couple of the best days of the week for all of us. Grant had already been having the time of his life, running around the ranch on a 4-wheeler doing various jobs with fencing and other repairs. Now we would all be out in the high pastures above the ranch repairing the last fences so that the horses could be brought back for the first time since the flood. The General was an inspiring figure as the spry commander led her troops up and down ravines, through the woods, across the streams to various points of failure of the fences where we would stop and make repairs.

The next day the horses returned triumphantly, and we got to spend time with them up close and personal too.



To stay strictly chronological, I must here intervene as Wednesday has arrived. Wednesday afternoons at Workcamp are free time, with the requirement to be back in time for the 7:30 evening program. Our Minnesota group decided to try to make the run from Loveland to the summit of Rocky Mountain National Park, then back to supper in Estes Park, with a final dash to the school in Loveland (similar to cat-herding, no small feat for a group of 20 teens and a few adults) but we had a great day of it, seeing sights many had never before beheld.



Our midweek hiatus complete, Thursday had us back at work in the canyon. After finally warming to our presence, Thad had been talking about and cooking some scrumptious food for us, including incredible cheesecake, but for Friday evening, he promised his famous Chicken Alfredo and Irish Curd bread, prepared and served in the huge gourmet kitchen of the cabin. Our mouths watered for days.

But we hit a snag on Friday around noon when Grant, while fixing fences, tore a nasty gash into his arm on some barbed wire. I cleaned the wound as best I could and butterflyed it closed temporarily, but we would have to go back to Loveland for proper treatment at a hospital, an hour away. Sitting in the waiting room, crew 3 could talk about nothing but the meal that had been promised. They absolutely demanded we go back regardless of how late it got, a demand I did not have to consider twice. His arm sewn back together, Grant and the rest of us headed back up the canyon one last time. When we arrived we found the kitchen already abuzz with activity, and at least one of us got involved in the preparations 😊.



We had a marvelous last few hours together as we relived the week's adventures over some unworldly food in a heavenly place, bonding in a way that is indescribable. We reluctantly parted ways in time to make it back to the school for the final evening program.

Thinking back now years later, Thad still mostly remains a mystery, with so many unanswered questions bouncing around my head. Where did he come from? Well, “Michigan”, he told us. How did he make a living? “I go to town and work when I need money”. Why are you doing this? Silence. Because it needed doing, I guess. His Past? Hidden from us; apparently not relevant. Doing the work of God? Definitely. Angel? I would not bet against it. Little wonder, I guess. All of us serving God in such a setting, with towering rocks all around, and snow-covered peaks in the distance; it seemed pretty heavenly.



What is not a mystery is how Crew 3 immersed themselves in the experience, the work, the service, the relationship building. It was such an honor and privilege to serve alongside of them that words cannot do it justice. Some of the work was dirty, boring, and grueling, but no one complained even when tasked with carrying armloads of steel fenceposts up steep mountainsides and scrambling up and down rocks and between gullies and washes. At the end of the week in fact, to a person they all said it had been the time of their lives.

It's hard to disagree with that.

Curt Boger

