

Toasting My Skin

By Pete Clark

During my years attending public schools when the day of the Class Picnic arrived, I knew summer was close by. On that day, all twenty of us in my class would climb into the back of a stake truck. There was always plenty of room to sit or stand holding onto the staked sides that surrounded the flatbed as we traveled the graveled county road. We went up to Fuller's Ranch on Copper Mountain. We would stop at a grassy meadow where some scrub cedars provided no shade, but we were young and full of vim and vinegar, daring life to try to knock us down. Who needed shade?

Within a couple of weeks after the Class Picnic, we would complete our Finals and be given a three month parole from tightly structured days and the burden of homework.

I knew summer was almost there when the days grew warmer and my shirt came off when I was not out in the public arena. Each summer I would try to suntan incrementally, but that never worked. I would become impatient with the process and let myself burn and blister. That does sound like a stupid way of doing things, but the sunburns and blisters never bothered me much. They were a transient and ritualized welcome for the hot days to come.

After my Freshman Year in high school I began working seismograph in the summers. I learned to hustle jugs, jugs being the seismometers that detected the reflected energy of dynamite exploding at the bottom of deep holes drilled into the ground. I also learned to work on the survey crew and to be a driller's helper, so I could work weekends if I so desired.

Before I left town to join the seismograph crew, wherever it may have been, a few of us would go swimming in Boysen Lake, a short distance west of Shoshoni. It did not matter how warm the late May or early June day might be, Boysen's water, flowing down from the snow melt in the Wind River Range, was ice cold. I would dive in and pop straight back up, almost clearing the surface of the lake. I would soon acclimatize to the frigid temperature of the water and have a good time swimming and splashing around. The only shock I received swimming in Boysen Lake was the time I surfaced with a Sand Baby hanging onto my ear. They are harmless, but very ugly.

I did not hear about melanoma when I was young. I never wore a cap unless I needed one with flaps to keep my ears warm in winter. In the summer I never wore a shirt when working outside unless it was cold and rainy. I knew the ascension of summer was complete when I looked into a mirror and saw some dark brown guy staring back at me. When I was as brown as the darkest people from Latin America, the sun had total control of its season.