

TO LIVE AND DIE IN GRAHAM, WA

JAMES NORDLUND

The trees went down in a matter of weeks. Soon they would be replaced by a Fred Meyer's parking lot. One lone, ragged tree stood in the clear cut. Its appearance was sickly at best; branches only comprised the half and up the north side, splintered and cracked. Why this tree wasn't cut down with the rest is an unanswered question, whose solution is likely mundane or pointless. Still, as a child, I wondered what that slightly twisted conifer did to deserve a suspended sentence when its family and community were unhesitatingly put to death. When it finally disappeared, after a few weeks of indignant protest, a building was erected in its stead.

The Fred Meyer's has expanded the lot since then to host fast food franchises, a Mexican restaurant, a few banks, a Starbucks (despite that there is a Starbucks already inside the Fred Meyer's), and a cyclical array of establishments that change or stay, pursuant to and depending on the frequency of their customers. Twenty-five years ago, the little Podunk mountain town of Graham had a population of around 9,000. Since then, it has increased its human residency to over 25,000—with 15,000 coming in just the last decade. The growth has brought apartment buildings, a new high school and middle school, and the closing of long established businesses to make way for new and ever rotating ones. Close by as well, just heading out of Graham, is every small town in America's dream: Wal-Mart.

Graham, Washington is named after Smith Graham; the foreman of the Cascade Timber Company's logging camp near its present designation. The story goes that he arrived in this area in 1905 and, because mail from Tacoma was given to him for distribution to the laborers, the phrase 'Take the mail to Graham' set the town's moniker in stone. In that time there were very few roads; none that connected Graham to any significantly established city. The first homesteaders

came from Tacoma by rail. These were farmers, loggers, wood mill laborers and, most importantly, since the area had been logged quite extensively, stump-farmers. The task of removing all the stumps in order to make the land fit for building homes, farming, and pasture was an undertaking of ambitious proportions.

In 1989, my parents moved from my Grandparents' place in Tacoma to a little doublewide trailer on an acre and a half in Graham. I was four years old. I have two brothers, one seven years older and the other fourteen months younger than me. My dad and brothers still live in the old doublewide trailer while my girlfriend and I live in a one room cabin in the back (my mom divorced my dad and left in 1999). I have at least one memory for every square inch of this property; some contain hundreds.

The ground in most of the yard is extremely rocky. When my friends and I took shovels and pickaxes to it we found the task of building dirt bicycle jumps was not an easy feat. Our determination was met with opposition; we often joked about it once being a river bed that had just been covered in. Scoop, scoop; rock. Scoop; rock. Rock; pick; scoop; rock. Digging was like this in most places. And then, the holiest of holies: soft, divine, clay-like soil; blackish deep brown pay-dirt, perfect for packing down on the lips so they became compact and smooth—when the tires roll off of it there is a *whhrroosshh* that cannot be recreated otherwise. Our trails/my dad's backyard became known among riders as L.T.L.—an acronym that fuzzily seems to have started as Loomis Trail Locals, after the *In Living Color* character Loomis B. Johnson, but it has had so many words inserted and replaced that I can't say for sure what it originally stood for. Many of the original diggers still ride on a regular basis and spent over a decade of toil, sacrifice, and much deserved enjoyment at L.T.L., but the trails had been abandoned in the last few years of its existence.

Riding bikes is something a lot of small town American kids understand as the only god damned thing to do besides drugs in most cases. I was one of those kids. If we weren't packing dirt down on a new jump and hucking ourselves over it, we were hitting the new construction developments for ledges and rails to grind, and to sometimes laugh our asses off at security guards who attempted to 'hold us until

police arrived' for damaging private property—we simply pedaled away. I don't regret scuffing the paint on someone's hand rail, chipping the paint on a business' ledge, or scarping my own knees, shins, and elbows out there. We didn't play baseball, football, or ping-pong for that matter. This was our sport; our choice of physical expression that would have otherwise been muted—not to mention less creative.

I used to set videos of us riding to music, attempting to emulate the skate and bike movies we watched, using two VCRs and a CD player. After a while I would go riding just to get footage of my friends to use for my latest production. I once spent a whole street riding road trip to Portland following along on a razor scooter with an old, clunky VHS camcorder. I started losing interest in progressing my own riding, since I wasn't very good anyway, and soon I exclusively just filmed. God, am I happy I did that; there would have been little to no record of our exploits if I hadn't. Some of the only surviving relics of those days are old, worn out VHS tapes.

The first store and post office in Graham opened in 1908 and was run by Henry and Nancy Bates. Henry became Graham's first postmaster in March of 1908. Soon another entrepreneur named David Presley opened a second, much larger store just kitty corner to the Bates' place. The Bates business slowed because they couldn't keep up with the variety and supply of goods that Presley offered. They began losing profits in 1911, and sold the store to aging Civil War veteran David G. Harvey. Henry Bates passed away in 1913.

Time goes by both quickly and slowly living in a small town. It seems like yesterday because of the familiarity of the landscape that I was pedaling my bike around, looking for something to destroy. Yet, it also seems like a lifetime ago that there was a log cabin-style restaurant building surrounded by trees where now there is an apartment complex. Directions can be given to anyone who has been around here long enough through a 'where the old *something* used to be.' Growth and expansion in places like Graham could be considered a good thing; building the economy and so-forth. But, it has its problems as well.

It was no big deal for twelve year olds to ride their bikes around town passed 10 p.m. on a summer night when I was young.

Rising crime and drug use have extinguished this freedom now. I saw people go from average teenagers with angst to strung out junkies, robbing whatever isn't tied down so they can haggle for their next fix. Oxycontin hit the scene when I was in high school. It became an epidemic. Pills flooded the streets. Soon it wasn't strange to hear that the cute girl in history class got sent to rehab by her parents. It wasn't out of the ordinary to learn that a quarter of the football team had controlled substance charges. When pharmaceutical companies were pressured and changed the way Oxy could be consumed—the pills were made so they couldn't be broken down and smoked or shot up—those hardcore users, some still teenagers, began using heroin. Suddenly, heroin was in. It has taken Oxy's place in a big way. You see, Oxy, in all its medicinal glory, is really nothing more than synthetic heroin. Raiding grandma's medicine cabinet changed to burglarizing the neighbor's big screen TV.

Before Oxy and heroin, meth was the big problem. It's actually hard to find someone in their thirties living in Graham that hasn't at least seen it. But law enforcement has effectively slowed the meth lab culture that supplied the tweakers with the bath tub crap that was prevalent in the 90s. Instead, much cleaner, refined and powerful drugs are coming up from Mexico.

As my friends and I grew older and dropped out of high school, our interests changed from riding bikes and raising hell to drinking and partying and raising hell. I was especially fond of the psychedelic side of drugs; psilocybin mushrooms, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), and the occasional ecstasy tablet (or four depending on the night). We always mixed our drugs with alcohol, which has a way of producing a potent 'fuck you' vibe. We drank nearly every single day; whether it was a couple of beers, a whole case of beers, or a half gallon of whiskey it didn't much matter as long as we were inebriated by sundown. Our consumption of toxins rose steadily and a few of us were getting into harder drugs. I stayed pretty mellow with my choices of mind altering substances and I never became overly dependent on anything I took. With the help of the beautiful girl who became my longtime girlfriend, I quit the constant party life and went back to school to pursue my writing. But it was not the same case for more than a few of my friends.

I had known Andrew since we were very young. He grew up next door to me and was one of the first to stick a shovel into the rocky earth at L.T.L. Vodka and pain killers were his vice of choice. One day while working in the garage he began to turn very pale and before his dad could find out what was wrong, he fainted and had to be rushed to the hospital. It turned out that he had fallen while drunk into a pile of scrap metal and bruised his pancreas. That, coupled with alcohol and pharmaceuticals, developed into acute pancreatitis. His organs rapidly shut down and before the end of the night he had completely lost brain function. His parents had no choice but to pull the plug.

Warren and Adam were big time partiers. They were always together sporting around in Warren's Mazda MR-2 drinking and snorting copious amounts of cocaine. I had known them from high school. After a kegger out in the woods they drove over a train track crossing going 130 mph and the tiny Mazda caught air, becoming a spinning torpedo that ripped into shreds like a pigeon through a jet turbine. Neither of them was wearing a seatbelt; neither made it to the hospital alive.

When I joined a metal band in my early twenties, a hang-around named John and I became pretty close friends. We both enjoyed speculating on our place in the cosmos, as well as staying up late and trying to out-drink each other. John's mom and step dad were big meth addicts all throughout his childhood. He had gone to prison while he was still in high school for beating his step dad half to death with a baseball bat for abusing his mom. When I first met him, he was a calm, collected individual, dealing with being clean from his own meth addiction. He began dabbling again pretty hard though. After days of no sleep he ran head on into a tow truck and was partially decapitated by the back window of his little Chevy.

My group of friends in high school consisted largely of people I had met outside of public school. Myself, and two other riders had started a punk rock band and I helped put together Bethel high school's battle of the bands in my junior year. After that performance I was approached by a leather jacket wearing punk rocker and fellow junior named Mike. We hit it off immediately and started partying and going to shows together. Mike was welcomed into the fold, becoming good friends with everyone in our group. He started dating a girl who was fresh out of prison and was an extreme junkie around the time I

had started back at school. Our paths slowly drifted apart and it wasn't long before he was shooting up heroin with her. Last February, Mike used a dirty needle and caught an infection. It started to abscess and by what I heard, none of his new junky 'friends' would take him to the hospital. His mom ended up picking him up from some dope house and rushed him to the emergency room. The infection caused blood poisoning so her efforts were too late. He passed away that night while I was in a playwriting class.

Last summer we bulldozed L.T.L. Months accumulating into years of work, all by hand driven implements of digging, was gone in a matter of hours. Flattened. The arid heat turned the grass and moss covered lips and landings into a leveled, dusty plain. The dozer unearthed a refrigerator that was the backbone of the first landing; then the remnants of decayed wood and fabric that was once a couch; a car engine emerged; golf balls; a basketball hoop back board; two riding lawnmowers; over half a dozen large tree stumps—buried and forgotten until that day. The exponential rise of dustiness in the yard made its way through the windows and was tracked into the house by clothing, shoes and pets for a time after, which became annoying and required a lot of wiping and cleaning. The trails had many little nooks for rodents—voles, shrews, field mice, the occasional migrating barn rat from my neighbor's chicken coop—all lost their little homes. Our pet cats had quite a time capturing them and leaving their carcasses on our door step. Growth came back quickly, however. By early fall's rain there were berry bushes sprouting back through the earth; grass breaking through the dry surfaced terrain.

In the middle of trails we had planted a ponderosa pine years ago. We watched it grow from sapling to an adult; from around three feet to fifteen or twenty feet tall. It has been left untouched.

Reference:

Anderson, Lawrence D. "In the Shadow of the Mountain."
Gorham Printing, Centralia, WA. 2007. Print.