

# Drought

*Larry T. Menlove*

The reservoir was drying up, and the former townspeople of Jordan Gap came to the receding shoreline at the end of winter. They camped on the flat and stood in the mud at the edge of the water to watch.

The church steeple was the first vestige to emerge from the green gray water, striking through on a Sunday morning. Bishop Green said, "Oh blessed day. Heavenly Father has heard our prayers." The rest of the townspeople peeked at each other and smiled cautiously as the sun burst over the white pines on the craggy ridge of Jersey Mountain. The people squinted at the sun and then back down at the water.

Word spread into the bureau that the people had come back, and Monday afternoon, the land manager, Josh, drove up to see for himself. He drove over the dam, a pink rock earthen affair that looked like a big foot stamped between the canyon walls. He drove on up the shoreline road to where the tents were. He got out of his green truck and walked to the water's edge where the people stood in a line.

Children gathered rocks in piles and then threw them as far as they could into the reservoir. Calvin and Karla Christenson pointed at the familiar TV antenna with the drying algae hanging limply from it over the dull water and then they embraced each other.

"But what is it you intend to do?" asked Land Manager Josh.

"Isn't it obvious?" the townspeople said.

"But it won't last," said Land Manager Josh. "Can't you see that?"

Spring was coming with northbound coots and black geese landing to sojourn on the receding water. The birds swam in and out of the second-story windows downtown and then lifted off the water with swirling wings beating the surface. They circled the people standing on the expanding shore and headed north by northeast in a cacophony of squeaks and squawks.

Brother and Sister Christenson were the first to move back in. The

water had been gone around their house for three days when they drove right up to the garage door, got out of their Suburban, and went into their house. They swept the floors, washed the windows, and scrubbed the countertops. Upstairs in the bedroom, they lay down on fresh, dry sheets, cheerful to be home with a renewed commitment to each other.

Two days later Rahanna, a widowed Lithuanian refugee with two small girls, moved back into her old house down the street from the Christensons. She put up new pink curtains while her daughters ran around to the backyard and played on the swing set. The younger one first had to take a dead rainbow trout from the swing seat and toss it into the water that was now down beyond the back fence. Rahanna's new boyfriend Dick oiled the chains on the swing set that had rusted and begun to stiffen.

As the days and weeks wore on, more and more folks came back. The Ruebens and the Gadsons. The Mandujanos, the Smiths, and Charlie Coombs, who was the baker. He set up shop again right downtown in his old bakery with the big, stone, wood-burning oven. His white bread had an earthy seasoning and his buns were a little silted, but that was to be expected until the oven tempered the reservoir flavor out.

A baby boy was mysteriously born to Fred and Cindy Montague, who had prayed and tried for years to conceive. And old Val Dart died of a stroke. His family buried him in the cemetery just past the park in an old family plot where the grass was coming back green and lush.

One blustery day Mayor Stein rolled into town and cruised down Main Street in a convertible, the reservoir dust whipping up behind him. He marched up the stairs to city hall and declared himself once again the mayor of Jordan Gap. His first act of business was to throw his hat high into the air where it spun and spun on the wind and, as far as anyone could tell, never came back down again.

Land Manager Josh kept a wary eye on the townspeople from his place on the ridge as they moved back in. He asked the higher ups what action should be taken. Let them live there if they want, the higher ups declared. Spring runoff will, well, run them off, was the general consensus.

But the runoff never came, and spring gave way to early summer and the reservoir dried up even more. The town was nearly full of residents again. Most all the former townspeople had come back to claim their land. The school had reopened in March and closed for summer break at the end of May. The Smiths asked their neighbors, the Mandujanos, to watch

their home and take in the newspaper while they packed up the car and their kids and went on vacation to Lake Halo in Swanson Valley.

The old Dart place was put up for sale and newlyweds Troy and Tana Young put down earnest money on it. They moved in a week later. Troy carried Tana over the threshold and into matrimonial heaven.

From his view on the ridge, Land Manager Josh saw the brotherly love and unadulterated care everyone in Jordan Gap had for one another. He drove down into town in his green truck and ate lunch at the Half Moon Diner. The other diners smiled and tipped their hats and said, "Hello." Land Manager Josh walked up Main Street after he ate his BLT and looked in on the candle, candy, and shoe cobbler shops. He drove out of town and told his wife Alice that very night that he wanted to live in Jordan Gap and live like they did. Alice snuggled next to him on the couch tighter than she had in years and whispered in his ear what a good idea that was.

Then, on a warm early June morning—the morning after the ward/block party where everyone in Jordan Gap ate hot dogs and hamburgers served in Charlie Coombs's buns (which were tasting less and less like water everyday) and lit firecrackers and sang under the stars—the widower Jacob Farley tilled the ground on the little late garden plot he had alongside his house. He relished the way the soil was thick with peat and the bones of catfish. He turned the dirt and laid furrows in straight lines and planted corn, beans, beets, onions, red bell peppers, and even, God willing, a pumpkin for next fall. He turned the rich earth back over the seeds in the sun and went inside for a glass of well-earned lemonade. And then, as it was his habit after planting his garden, he went to his bedroom, kneeled at his bed, and there, alone, old Brother Farley prayed humbly for rain.