The sun shines, hay is being made.

All along English Creek and Noon Creek, mowing and raking and stacking is the order of the day. As to how this year's cutting compares with those of recent years—have you seen any rancher recently who wasn't grinning like a Christian holding four aces?

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, July 20

"Hand me a half-inch, would you, Jick."

"Here you go."

I passed the six-end wrench of that size to Pete beneath the power buckrake. There was a grunt of exertion, a flash of metal as the wrench flew, and the news from Pete:

"Sonofabitch must be a 3 1\(\frac{1}{8}\) three-eighths."

I had been here before. "Did you get your knuckles?"

"Sure did."

"Did you round the head off the bolt?"

"Sure did."
"Are you sure you want to put up hay again this year?"

"Guess what, nephew. The next rusted-up sonofabitch of a bolt under here has got your name on it."

At noon of that first day of getting Pete's haying machinery into running order, when he and I came in to wash up for dinner Marie took one look at the barked knuckles and skin scrapes and blood blisters on both of us and inquired:

"Did you two count your fingers before you started all this?"

Despite what it took out of a person's hide, I still look back on that as among the best possible employment, my summer job in the hayfield as scatter raker for Pete.

The Reese ranch was a beauty for hay. Pete inherited not only my grandfather Isaac Reese's acreage there along Noon Creek but also old Isaac's realization that nurturing more than one source of income is as good an idea as you can have in Montana. Pete was continuing with the sheep Isaac had turned to after the crash of cattle prices and had set to work developing his hayfields, running ditches into the bottomland meadows to irrigate them from Noon Creek. Even during the Depression's driest years, Pete always had hay to sell during the
winter. This year, it looked as if he would have a world of the stuff.

Those bottomland meadows of wild hay lay one after another along the creek like green pouches on a thong. Then there was the big field of tall-grass.

Creek-English Creek divide which grew dry-land alfalfa. In a wet year like this one, the alfalfa was soaring up more than knee-high and that wide benchland field looked as green as they say the Amazon is.

Those first days after the Fourth of July, the hay was very nearly ready for us and I was more than ready for it. Ready to have the McCaskill family situation off my mind for the main part of each day, at least. It did not take a great deal of original thinking, in those first days after the Fourth, to realize that the deadlock between my parents and Alec was stouter than it had been before. If Alec ever needed any confirming in his rooting-calf-roping tooting cowboy notion of himself, his martial and pugilistic triumphs had done more than to so. Both of those and Leona too—Alec's feet might not even touch the ground until about August. Anyway, I had spent so much thought on the matter already that summer that my mind was ready for a new direction. My father, my mother, Alec: let them do the sorting-out of
Alec's future... I now had an imminent one—haying at Noon Creek—of my own.

...I have said. "The summer when," my mother ever after called this one. For me, the summer when not even haying... turned out as expected. The summer when I began to wonder if anything ever does.

To be quite honest, on a task like those first few days of reading the equipment for haying I provided Pete more company than... I did help. I mean, I can fix machinery when I have to but I'd rather be doing anything else. My point of view is that I would be more enthusiastic about the machine era if the stuff healed itself instead of requiring all the damn repair it does. And Pete was much the same as me where wrench work was involved.
But I still maintain, companionship is no small thing to create. Amid all that damn bolting, unbolting, rebolting, bushing, shimming, washering, greasing, oiling, banging, sharpening, straightening, and

wouldn't you welcome a little conversation? And the farther removed from the mechanical chore at hand, the better? At least my uncle and I thought so. I recall Peter telling me about the Noon Creek Kee-Kee bird. "You never heard of the Kee-Kee bird we got around here? Jick, I am surprised at you. The Kee-Kee bird shows up here the first real day of winter every year. Lands on top of the barn over there and takes a look all around. Then he says, 'Kee-Kee-Keerist All Mighty, this is a-cold country!' and heads for California."

I in return favored Pete with a few of the songs from Stanley's repertoire, starting with the one about the lady who was wild and woolly and full of fleas and never had been curried above her knees.

He looked a little startled at my musical knowledge, but was interested enough.

This sticks with me—the surprise of hearing, from a face so reminiscent of my mother's, the kind of language Pete unloosed on the haying equipment during those repair days. It also was kind of refreshing.
So all in all, Pete and I got along like hand and glove. And I have already recited Marie's glories, back there at the Fourth of July picnic. If anybody in the Two country could cook in the same league as my mother, it was Marie. So my ears and the rest of me both were well nourished, that couple of days as Pete and I by main strength and awkwardness got the haying gear into running order.

It never occurred to me at the time, but I suppose Pete welcomed having me around—and Alec in the earlier summers when he was in the raking job—because he and Marie were childless. Their son died at birth, and Marie very nearly died with him; her health in fact had never been strong since. So for a limited time, at least, someone my age was a privileged character with the Reeses.

Even so, I waited until Pete and I were finishing up the last piece of equipment—replacing broken guards on the mowing machine—before I tried him on this:
"Pete, you know Stanley Meixell, don't you?"

"Used to. Why?"

"I'm just sort of curious. My folks don't say much about him."

"He's been a long time gone from this country. Old history."

"Were you around him when he was the English Creek ranger?"

"Sort of. When everybody on Noon Creek who could spell K-O-W was running cattle up there on the forest. During the war and just after, that was."

"How was he as a ranger?"

"How was he?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, did Stanley go about things pretty much the way Dad does? Fuss over the forest like he was its mother hen, sort of?"

"Stanley always struck me as more of a rooster than a mother hen."

That, I didn't get. Stanley hadn't seemed to me particularly strutting in the way he went about life. "But I will say this," Pete went on. "Stanley Meixell and your father know those mountains of the Two better than anybody else alive. They're a pair of a kind, on that."
"They are?" That the bunged-up whiskey-sloshing caretaker I had squired around up there was as much a master of the mountains as my father—all due respect to Pete, but I couldn't credit it. Maybe his specific knowledge of Stanley was better than his general, so I asked:

"Well, after he was the English Creek ranger, where was his ticket to?"

"His ticket?"

"That's the saying they have in the Forest Service about being transferred. After here, where did Stanley get transferred to?"

"The Forest Service isn't my ball of string, Jick. How do you feel about sharpening some sickles? There's a couple against the wall of the shop somewhere."

"How's she going, Jick?"

The third morning I rode over to Pete and Marie's, the mower man Bud Dolson greeted me there at breakfast. Pete had gone into Gros Ventre to fetch him the night before, Bud having come up on the bus all the way from Anaconda. Ordinarily he was on the bull gang at the smelter there, a kind of roustabout's job as I understood it.

"Good to get out in the air for a change," Bud claimed was his
reason for coming to mow hay for Pete summer after summer. Smelter fumes would be a sufficient ticket to anywhere, yes. But I have a sneaking hunch that the job as mower man, a month of being out there by himself with just a team of horses and a mowing machine and the waiting hay, meant quite a lot in itself to somebody as quiet as Bud.

The first genuine hot day of summer arrived with Bud, and by about 8 o'clock the dew was off the hay and he was cutting the first swath of one of the Noon Creek meadows, a path of fallen green beside the standing green.

"How do, Jick."

While I was saddling Pony to go home at the end of that afternoon, Perry Fox came riding in from Gros Ventre.

You still could find Perry's species in a lot of Montana towns then, old Texas punchers who rode north on a trail drive somewhere before the turn of the century, and for this reason or that, never found their way back to Texas. Much of the time when I was growing up, Gros Ventre had as many as three of them: Andy Cratt, Deaf Smith Mitchell,
of escape always narrowed instantly to the same point: where, except up to the sweet blue meadows of heaven, was there to go?

"The world has many wheres," said Melander. "We need just four of them."

Melander drained his mug in a final gulp, folded himself down to rest one knee on the dirt and with a stick began to diagram.

A first south-pointing stab of shoreline, like a broad knife blade. Baranov Island, on the oceanward side of which they squatted now.

A speckle of isles, then a large landform, south-pointing too, like the sheath Baranov had been pulled from. The Queen Charlotte group of islands.
and Perry Fox. They had all been hands for the old Seven Block ranch when it was the cattle kingdom of this area, then afterward hung on by helping out the various small ranchers at branding time and when the calves were shipped, and in between, breaking a horse for somebody now and again. Perry Fox was the last of them alive yet. In his late seventies I guess he had to be, for Toussaint Rennie told my father he could remember seeing both Perry and Deaf Smith Mitchell in the roundup of 1882, skinny youngsters aboard big Texian saddles. Now too stove-up for a regular ranch job, Perry spent his winters in Dale Quigg's saddle store helping out with harness mending and other leather work, and his summer job was on the bunch rake for Pete.

As I responded to Perry's nod and drawl of "How d'ya do, Dick" and watched him undo his bedroll and war bag from behind his saddle—like Bud—I happened to notice that he had a piece of rope stretched snug beneath his horse's belly and knotted into each stirrup. I could think of...
Another brief broken isle-chain of coast, then a long blunt slant, almost sideways to the other coastal chunks. Vancouver Island.

At last, fourth and biggest solidity in this geographical flagstone of Melander's, the American coastline leading to the Columbia River. The place where the coast and the river met, Melander Xed as if making his name-mark. Astoria.

Map lesson done, Melander recited the mainframe of his plan. That if they selected their time well and escaped by night they could work a canoe south along the coast. That there at its southern extent, down beyond the Russian territory and that of the Hudson's Bay Company,
on me, stirrups tied like that. That night I asked my father about it.

Come to that, has he, my father said. Riding with hobbled stirrups.

I still didn't savvy.

At his age Perry can't afford to get thrown any more, my father spelled it out for me. He's too brittle to mend. So with the stirrups tied down that way, he can keep himself clamped on if his horse starts to buck."

"Maybe he just ought to quit riding horseback," I said, without thinking it through.

My father set me straight on that, too. "Guys like Perry, if they can't ride you might as well take them out and shoot them. Perry has never learned to drive a car. The minute he can't climb onto a horse and keep himself there, he's done for."
The fourth morning, Pete had me harness up Blanche and Fisheye
and take my rake to the mowed field to help Perry get the dump raking
underway. Truth be told, that day I was the one who did most of the
dump raking—scooping the hay into windrows, that was—and Perry
shakes his head and said, "not yet--let's go back and see what needs to be done."
tinkered and tinkered with his rake teeth and his dump lever and his horses'
harness and so on. Right then I fully subscribed to what Pete said
about his custom of hiring Perry haying after haying: "He's slow as
the wrath of Christ, but he is steady." I suppose if my behind was
as aged and bony as Perry's,
I wouldn't have been in any hurry either to apply it to a rake seat
for the coming four weeks.
At the end of that first day of windrowing, when Perry and I had unhitched our teams and Pete was helping us look them over for any harness sores, up the road to the ranch buildings came the Forest Service pickup and in it my father and my mother as well. They'd been to Great Falls on a headquarters trip my father had to make for one reason or another, and on the way home they swung by First Avenue South to chauffeur the last of the haying crew to Pete.

He tumbled out of the back of the Forest Service pickup now.

The stackman, Wisdom Johnson.

"Hey, Pete!" cried Wisdom. Even after the 2-hour ride from Great Falls in the back of the pickup Wisdom was not what could be called even approximately sober. On the other hand, he wasn't so swacked up he had fallen out of the pickup on the way to the job, which was the hiring standard that counted. "Hey, Perry!" the greeting process went on. "Hey, Jick!" If the entire population of Montana had been there in the Reese yard, Wisdom would have greeted every one of them identically. Wisdom Johnson's mind may not have been one of the world's broadest, but it liked to practice whatever it knew.
"As I savvy it, Wisdom," acknowledged Pete, "that's what you're here for, all right--hay."

"Pete, I'm ready for it," Wisdom earnestly. "If you want to start stacking right now, I am ready. You bet I am. How about it, ready to go?" Wisdom squinted around like Lewis and Clark must have. "Where's the field?"

"Wisdom, it's suppertime," Pete pointed out. "Morning will be soon enough to start stacking. You feel like having some grub?"

Wisdom considered. "No. No, I don't." He swallowed to get rid of the idea of food. "What I need to do is sort of sit down for awhile."

Perry stepped forward. "I'll herd him to the bunkhouse. Right this way, Wisdom. Where'd you winter?"

"Out on the coast," reported Wisdom as he unsteadily accompanied Perry. "Logging camp, up north of Grays Harbor. Rain! Perry, do you know it'd sometimes rain a week steady? I just did not know it could rain that much--"

Chin in hand and elbow propped on the doorframe, my mother watched all this out the rear window of the pickup. Now she opened the door and stepped out.
Not surprisingly, my mother looked about two-thirds riled.

I don't know of any Montana woman who has never gritted her teeth, one time or another, over that process of prying men off bar stools and getting them launched toward home. "I'll go in and visit Marie," she announced, which all of us were glad enough to have happened.

Pete made sure my mother was out of earshot, then inquired: "He at Sheba's place, was he?"

"No, in the Mint, though he did have Bouncing Betty with him. She wasn't about to turn loose of him, as long as he had a nickel to his name." Upon study, my father looked somewhat peevish, too. Wisdom must have taken considerable persuading to part with Bouncing Betty. "So at least I didn't have to shake him directly out of a whore's bed. But that's about the best I can say for your caliber of employee, brother-in-law."

Pete broke a grin at my father and razzed: "I wouldn't be so damn hard up for crew if you'd paid attention to the example of Good Help Hebner and raised anything besides an occasional scatter raker."

Somehow Pete had known what the moment needed. Pete's kidding had within it the fact that the other of the rake-driving McCaskill brothers had been Alec, and he was not a topic my father particularly cared to hear about these days. Yet here it came, the half-wink of my father's left eye and the answer to Pete's crack: "Scatter rakers were as good as I could do. Whatever that says about my caliber."
The fifth day, we made hay.

The windrows that Perry and I had raked formed a pattern I have always liked—a meadow with ribs of hay, evenly spaced. Now Perry was dump raking the next field along the creek and Bud was mowing the one beyond that.

Those of us in the stacking crew began our end of the matter.

We sited the overshot stacker toward the high edge of the meadow, so the haystack would be up out of the deepest winter snowdrifts along Noon Creek. With the power buckrake, Pete shoved several loads of hay into place behind the stacker. Then Wisdom tossed and smoothed with his pitchfork until he had the base of his stack made the way he wanted it. An square island of hay almost but not quite square—8 paces wide, 10 paces long—and about chest-high.

"You said last night you were ready, Wisdom," called Pete. "Here it comes." And he bucked the first load of hay onto the fork of the stacker. "Send it to heaven, Clayton."

The final man, or I should say member, of our haying crew was the stacker team driver. Twelve-year-old Clayton Hebner. Pete always hired whichever Hebner boy was in the 12-to-14-year range for that
stacker team job and they were pretty much interchangeable, a skinny kid with a forelock and nothing to say for himself; apparently the volume knob for that whole family was on Good Help Heber. All that was really noticeable about Clayton was his Heber way of always eyeing you, as if you were the latest link in evolution and he didn't want to miss the moment when you sprouted wings or fins. At Pete's words Clayton now started into motion his team of horses which were hitched to the cable which, through a tripod-and-pulley rig within the stacker, lifts the twin arms of the stacker and the hay-loaded fork, and the hay goes up and up until---

It occurs to me: does everybody these days think hay naturally comes in bales? That God ordained for livestock to eat from 80-pound loaves of hay tied up in twine by $10,000 machinery? If so, maybe I had better describe the notion of haying as it used to be. All in the world it amounted to was gathering hay into stacks about the size of an adobe house; a well-built haystack even looks as solid and straightforward as an adobe structure, though of course stands higher and has a rounded-off top. But try it yourself sometime, this gathering of 10 or 12 tons of hay into one stack, and you will see where all the equipment comes in. Various kinds of stackers were used in various areas of the West--beaverslides, Mormon derricks, swinging forks, jayhawks--but Pete's preference was an overshot. An overshot stacker worked as its
name suggests, tossing a load of hay up over a high wide framework which served as a sort of scaffolding for the front of the haystack.

If, say, you hold your arms straight out in front of you, with your hands clutching each end of a basket with hay piled in it; now bring your arms and the basket straight up over your head with a little speed, and you are tossing the hay exactly as an overshot does.

In short, a kind of catapult principle is involved. But a slow one, for

it is the responsibility of the stacker team driver to pace the horses so that the arms and fork fling the hay onto the stack the stackman wants it. Other than being in charge of the speed of the team, though, it is a hell of a dull job, walking back and forth behind the horses as they run the overshot up and down, all damn day long, and that's why a kid usually got put on the stacker team job.
So hay was being sent up, and as this first haystack and the
day's temperature both began to rise, Wisdom Johnson suffered. This
too was part of the start of haying—Wisdom sweating the commerce of
Great Falls saloons out of himself. Soaking himself sober, lathering
himself into the summer's labor. We all knew what the scene would
be this initial morning, Wisdom lurching around up there atop the
hay as if had a log chained to each leg. It was a little painful
to watch, especially now that my camptending sojourn with Stanley
had taught me what a hangover truly is. Yet agonized as Wisdom looked,
the stack was progressing prettily, as we also knew it would. The
stackman, he was the maestro of the haying crew. When the rest of
us had done our mowing or raking or bucking or whatever, the final
result of it all was the haystack the stackman built. And Wisdom Johnson
could build them, as he put it, "high and tall and straight."

No question about it, Wisdom was as big and brawny as they come;
nine of him would have made a dozen. And he also just looked as
if he belonged atop a haystack, for he was swarthy enough to be able
to work all day up there without his shirt on, which I envied much.
If I tried that I'd have burned and blistered to a pulp. Wisdom
simply darkened and darkened, his suntan a litmus each summer of
how far along our haying season was.
As July heated up into August, more than once it occurred to me that, with the sweat bathing Wisdom as he worked up there next to the sun, and his arm muscles protruding handsomely as he shoved the hay around, and the dark leathering of his skin, he was getting to look like Joe Louis. But of course that wasn't something you could say to a white person back then.

This was the second summer of Wisdom being known as Wisdom instead of his true name, Cyrus Johnson. The nickname came about because he had put up hay a number of seasons in the Big Hole Basin down in the southwestern part of the state, and according to him the Big Hole was the front parlor of heaven. The hay there was the best possible, the workhorses all but put their harnesses on themselves each morning, the pies of Big Hole ranch cooks nearly floated off into the air from the swads of meringue atop them—the list of glories went on and on. Inasmuch as the Big Hole had a great reputation for hay even without Sidney's testimony, the rest of us at the table tended to nod and say nothing. But then came one suppertime, during the first summer I hayed for Pete, when Cyrus started
in on a fresh Big Hole glory. "You
take that Wisdom, now. There's my idea of a town. It's the friendliest,
drinkingest, prettiest place--"

"Wisdom? That burg?" Ordinarily Bud Dolson was silence itself.

But Anaconda was not all that far from the Big Hole town ofWisdom and
Cyrus
Bud had been there. As Sidney now had the misfortune of asking him.

"I think so," replied Bud. "I blinked, I might have missed most

of it."

Cyrus looked hurt.

"Now what do you mean by that?"

"Cyrus, I mean that the town of Wisdom makes the town of Gros Ventre
look like London, England."

"Aw, come on, Bud. Wisdom is a hell of a nice town."

Bud shook his head in pity. "If you say so, Wisdom." And ever

since, the big stackman was Wisdom Johnson to us.
This first stack was well underway, Pete had buckraked several windrows in to the stacker. Now began my contribution to the haying process. I went over and climbed onto my scatter rake.

If you happen never to have seen one, a scatter rake simply resembles a long axle—mine was a 10-foot type—between a set of iron wheels, high spoked ones about as big around as those you think of a stagecoach having, but not nearly so thick and heavy. The "axle," actually the chassis of the rake, carries a row of long thin curved teeth, set about a hand's width apart from each other, and it is this regiment of teeth that rakes along the ground and scrapes any stray hay lying there. As if the hayfield was a head of hair and the scatter rake a big iron comb going over it, so to speak. Midway between the wheels a seat stuck up for the rake drive—to ride on, and a wooden tongue extended forward for a team of horses to be hitched to.

My team was in harness and waiting. Blanche and Fisheye. As workhorses go, they weren't too bad a pair; a light team, as you didn't need the biggest horses in the world just to pull a scatter rake, but more on the steady side than frisky. That Blanche and Fisheye were
civilized at all was a relief to me, because you never know what
you might get in a team of horses. One of them maybe can pull like
a Percheron but is dumb, and the other one clever enough to teach
gometry but so lazy he constantly lays back in the traces. Or one
horse may be a kicker, and his mate so mild you could pass a porcupine
under him without response. So except for Fisheye staring sideways at you in a fishy way as you harnessed him, and Blanche looking like she needed a rap all the time, this team of mine was better than the horse law of averages might suggest.

I believe I am right in saying Pete was the first rancher in the Two country to use a power buckrake—an automobile chassis with a fork mounted on it to buck the hay in from the field to the stack. Wisdom Johnson had brought word of the invention of the power buckrake in the Big Hole: "I tell you, Pete, they got them all over that country. They move faster than you can see."

That proved to be not quite the case, but the contraption could gather hay as fast as two buckrakes propelled by horses. Thus, internal combustion engine roared into the Reese hayfields and speeded matters up, but it also left dabs of hay behind it, scatterings which had either blown off the buckrake fork or which it simply missed. The scatter raker was the gatherer of that hay, which otherwise would be wasted.

In place on my rake seat, I clucked to Blanche and Fisheye, reined them toward the part of the meadow Pete had been bucking in loads from, and my second summer of scatter raking was begun.
I suppose I have to admit, anybody who could handle a team of
workhorses could run a scatter rake. But not necessarily run it as it ought to be done. The trick
was to stay on the move but at an easy pace, keep the horse in mild
motion and the rake teeth down there gathering leftover hay, instead
of racing around here and yon. Roam and glean, by going freestyle
over a field as a fancy skater swoops around on ice. Well, really
not quite that free and fancy, for with the horse and a 10-foot
rake you are directing maybe a ton of moving weight, the horse portion
of it possessed of notions of its own, and so them has to be somewhat
approximate. But still I say, the more you could let yourself go
and just follow the motion flow of the hayfield, so to speak—swoop
in where the buckrake had just been, even if there wasn't much
spilled hay apparent there—the better off you were as a scatter
raker. A mind as loose as mine was about right for scatter raking.
"How did it go?" my mother asked, that first night of full haying. We were waiting supper for my father, who was somewhere up the North Fork inspecting the progress of a CCC trail crew there.

"A stack and a half," I reported offhandedly as if I had been a hayhand for centuries. "About usual, for first day."

"How did you get along with Blanche and Fisheye?"

They're logey pair of sonsa--" I remembered in time to mend my mouth; the vocabulary I'd been using around Pete and the crew was a quick ticket to trouble here at home--"of so and sos. But they're okay."

She appraised me from where she was leaning against the kitchen sink, arms folded across her chest. Then surprised me with her smile and: "It's quiet around here, without you."

I chose to take that as a compliment. More than that, I risked ribbing her in return, a little. "Well, I guess I could call you up on the telephone every noon at Pete and Marie's, and sing you a song or tell you a joke."

"Never mind. That's all right, Mister Imagination," she declined. "I'll adjust."
I didn't pay it sufficient mind at the time, but in truth my mother did have to adjust. Alec in exile. Me rationed between English Creek and the Noon Creek hayfields. My father beginning to be gone more and more as fire danger increased in the forest. The reverse of her usual situation of a houseful of male McCaskills—a genuine scarcity of us. There is another topic which occupies my mind these days—the way life sorts us into men and women, not on any basis of capability that I have ever been able to see. High on the list of questions I wish I'd had the brains to ask, throughout that immense summer, is the one to my mother—her view about being born as a woman into a region which featured male livelihoods.

"You finally starved out up there, did you," she now greeted my father's late arrival. "Wash up and sit up, you two, supper will be just a minute now."

"How'd it go today?" my father asked me, and I repeated my report of Reese haying. Through that and other supper conversation he nodded and said uh-huh a lot, which signaled that he was only half-listening.

The symptom was annual. At this point of the summer, and hot as this
one suddenly had turned, fire was forever on the mind of a forest ranger. The joke was told that when the preacher at a funeral asked if anyone wanted to memorialize the deceased, a forest ranger was the first one onto his feet and began:

"Old Tom wasn't the worst fellow I ever knew. Now I'd like to add a few words about fire control."

When you think about it, my father's yearly mood about fire was understandable enough. He was responsible for an entire horizon. The skyline made up of peaks and reefs and timbered slopes and high grasslands: that conglomeration of nature was designated his district of the Two Medicine National Forest, and every blessed inch of it was prey to lightning storms and careless campfires and flipped cigarettes. His line of defense was a light thread of men across that mass of mountain and forest; the lookouts in the tall towers, and at this time of year, the fire guards he would start stationing in camps and cabins for quick combat against lightning strikes or smolders of any other sort. My father entirely subscribed to the theory that the time to fight a forest fire was before it got going. True, the timber of the Two here on the east
face of the Rockies was not as big and flammable as the forests farther west in Montana and Idaho. "But that doesn't mean they're made of goddamn asbestos either," ran the complaint of east-side rangers against the Two, the Lewis and Clark, the Custer, the Helena, towards what they saw as a westward tilt in the thinking and budget of Region One headquarters. It was a fact that the legendary fires occurred west of the Continental Divide. The Bitterroot blaze of 1910 was an absolute hurricane of flame. Into smoke went 3 million acres of standing trees, a lot of it the finest white pine in the world. And about half the town of Wallace, Idaho, burned. And this too—the Bitterroot fire killed 85 persons, 84 of them done in directly by the flames and the other one walked off a little from a hotshot crew on Setzer Creek and put a pistol to himself. The Forest Service, which was only a few years old at the time, was bloodied badly by the Bitterroot fire. And as recently as 1934, there had been the fiasco of the Selway fires near the Idaho-Montana line. That summer, the Selway National Forest became the Alamo of Region One. Into
those fires the regional forester, Major Kelley, and his headquarters staff poured 5,400 men, and they never did get the flames under control. The Pete King fire, the McClendon Butte fire, the Hell Gate fire east of the Lochsa River, the Coolwater fire, a spot fire at Canyon Creek, all were roaring at once. When the OO fire blew up, a couple of hundred CCC guys had to run like jackrabbits to escape it. Five fire camps went up in smoke, the OO ranger station almost did. Nothing the Forest Service tried worked. Nothing could work, really. An inferno has no thermostat. In those years, the official notion of fighting a forest fire was what was called the 10 a.m. policy: aim for control of the fire by 10 the next morning. My father was following the reports from the Selway and said, "The Major better just aim for 10 a.m. on Christmas Day for this one." Actually the rains of late September finally slowed the Selway fires, and only weeks after that, the Major killed off the Selway National Forest, parcelled out its land to the neighboring Clearwater and Nezperce forests and scattered its staff like the tribes of Israel. The Selway summer sobered everybody working in Region One—the total defeats by fire and the Major's obliteration of a National Forest unit—and for damn sure no ranger wanted any similar nightmare erupting in his own district.
I stop to recount all this because of what happened now, as my father finished supper and thumbed open the day's one piece of mail, an official Forest Service envelope. "What've we got here," he wondered, "the latest kelleygram?"

His next utterance was: "Sonofabitch."

He looked as if he had been hit with a 2 x 4, stunned and angry.

Then, as if the words would have to change themselves when read aloud, he recited from the letter:
fired season

"Placement of manpower this year will be governed by localized fire danger measurements. An enforced lag of manning below current danger will eliminate over-manning designed to meet erratic peak loads and will achieve material decrease in FF costs over past years' expenditures. Organization on east-side forests in particular is to be held to the lowest level consistent with carefully analyzed current needs."

My mother oh so slightly shook her head, as if this confirmed her suspicions of brainlessness in the upper ranks of the U.S. Forest Service. My father crumpled the letter and crossed the kitchen to the window looking out on Roman Reef and Phantom Woman peak and other of the mountains of the Two.

I asked, "What's all that mean?"

"On our side of the Divide,"

"No fire guards until things start burning," said my father without turning from the window.
Right up until the time haying started, I had been rehearsing
to myself how to talk my parents into letting me live in the bunkhouse
at Pete's with the rest of the hay crew. It was something I imagined
I much wanted to do. Be in on the gab of Wisdom and Perry and Bud,
hear the tales of the Big Hole and First Avenue South and Texas and
Anaconda and so on and so on. Gain one more rung towards being a
grown-up, I suppose it came down to. Yet when haying time arrived
I did not even bring up the bunkhouse issue.

For one thing, I could anticipate my mother's enunciation about
one shavetail McCaskill already living in a bunkhouse and to judge
by Alec's summer behavior "One Was More Than Enough." For another,
with my father on the go as much as he was this summer; it seemed plain
that he would prefer for me to be on hand at English Creek whenever he
couldn't be. But do you know, I actually made it unanimous against
myself. What the matter came right down to was that I didn't want
to give up the porch bedroom at English Creek for the dubious gain
of bunking with hay hands.

Which is how I became a one-horsepower commuter. The one horse
being Pony, whom I found I regarded with considerable more esteem ever
since Mouse decided to hose down the rodeo grounds that time in front
of Leona. Each morning now I got up at 5, went out and caught
and saddled Pony outside the barn—quite a lot of light in the sky
that time of year—and the pair of us would head for the Reese ranch.

Where morning is concerned, I am my father all over again. "The
day goes downhill after daybreak," was his creed. I don't suppose
there are too many people now who have seen a majority of the dawns
of their life, but my father did, and I have. And of my lifetime of
early rising I have never known better dawns than those when I rode
from English Creek to my haying job on Noon Creek.

The ford north of the ranger station, Pony and I would cross—
if there was enough moon the wild roses along the creek could be
seen, pale crowds of them—and in few minutes of climbing we came
atop the bench of land which divides the two creek drainages. Up
there, at that brink-of-dawn hour, the world reveals all its edges.
Dark lines of the tops of buttes and benches to the north, towards
the Two Medicine River and the Blackfeet Reservation. The Sweetgrass
Hills bumping up far on the eastern horizon like black sand.
The timbered crest of Breed Butte standing up against the stone
mountain wall of the west. What trick of light it is I can't really
say, but everything looked as if drawn in heavy strokes, with the
The only breaks in the stillness of it all were Pony's hooves against the earth, and the west breeze which generally met us atop that broad benchland. I say breeze. In the Two country anything that doesn't lift you off your horse is only a breeze. My mountain coat was on me, my hat pulled low, my hands in leather work gloves, and I was just about comfortable.

Since Pete's haying season lasted a month or a little more, I rode right through the phases of the moon. My favorite you can guess on first try. The fat full moon, resting there as if it was an agate marble which had rolled into the western corner of the sky. During the early half of my route the mountains still drew most of their light from the moon, and I watched the reefs and other rock faces change completion—from light gray to ever so slightly pink—as the sunrise began to touch them. Closer to me, the prairie flowers now began to make themselves known amid the tan grass. Irises, paintbrushes, bluebells, sunflowers.

Then this. The first week or so of those daybreak rides, the sun was north enough that it came up between the Sweetgrass Hills.
They stand 60 or 70 miles from where I set stop across the prairie from where I was riding, way over towards Havre, so there was a sense that I was seeing a sunrise happening in a far land. The gap between the mounded sets of hills first filled with a kind of film; a haze of coming light, it might be called. Then the sun would slowly present itself, like a big glowing coal burning its way up through the horizon.

Those dawns taught me that beauty makes the eyes greedy. For even after all that, mountains and moon and earth edges and the coming of the sun, I considered that what was most worth watching for was the first shadow of the day. When the sun worked its way about half above the horizon, that shadow emerged to stretch itself off from Pony and me, horse and youngster melded, into an apparition of leftover dark a couple of hundred feet in length. Drawn out on the prairie far-reaching grass in that fantastic first shadow, Pony and I loomed like some new creature put together from the main parts of a camel and a giraffe.

Is it any wonder then that each of these haying-time dawns made me feel remade?
Meanwhile it continued to be the damnedest summer of weather anybody could remember. All that rain of June, and then July making a habit of 90 degrees, and now on the morning of the 21st of July we woke up to snow in the mountains. Fire was on the loose elsewhere in Montana—spot fires across the Divide in the Flathead country and up in Glacier Park, and a big blaze down in Yellowstone Park that hundreds of men were on—

while my father's forest lay snoozing under a cool sheet of white.

"How did you arrange that?" my mother mock-questioned him at breakfast. "Clean living and healthy thoughts?"

"The powerr of Scotch prayerr," he rumbled back at her in his preacher voice. Then with his biggest grin in weeks: "Also known as the law of averages. Tough it out long enough in this country and a snowstorm will eventually happen when you actually want it to."
Putting up Pete's hay always took about a month, given some
days of being rained out or broke down. This proved to be a summer
when we were reasonably lucky about both moisture and breakage. So
steadily that none of us on the crew said anything about it for fear
of changing our luck, day on day along Noon Creek our new stacks
appeared, like fresh green loaves.

My scatter raking became automatic with me. Of course, whenever
my mind doesn't have to be on what I am doing, it damn well for sure
is going to be on some other matter. Actually, though, for once in
my life I did a respectable job of combining my task at hand and my
wayfaring thoughts. For if I had a single favorite daydream of
those hayfield hours, it
If I had a single favorite daydream of those hayfield hours, it was to wonder why a person couldn't be a roving scatter raker in the way that sheep shearers and harvest hands moved with their seasons. I mean, why not? The principle seems to me the same: a nomad profession. I could see myself traveling through Montana from hay country to hay country—although preferably with a better stepper than Blanche, if there was much distance involved—and hiring on, horse and rake and all, at the best-looking ranch of each locale. Maybe spend a week, at the peak of haying, ten days, at each. Less if the grub was mediocre, longer if a real dwell pie maker was in the kitchen. Live in the bunkhouse so as to get to know everybody on a crew, for somehow each crew, each hay hand, discernably a little was in some way different from any other. Then once I had learned enough about that particular country and earned this from the boss, "Be with us again next year, won't you?", on I would go, rolling on, the iron wheels and line of tines of my scatter rake like some odd overwide chariot rumbling down the road.

A case of wanderlust, this may sound like, but then it took very little to infect me at that age. Can this be believed? Except for once when all of us at the South Fork school were taken to
Helena to visit the capitol, a once-in-awhile trip with my father

when he had to go to forest headquarters in Great Falls was the farthest

I had ever been out of the Two country. Ninety miles; not much of a

grand tour. There were places of Montana I could barely even imagine.

Butte. All I knew definitely of Butte was that when you met anyone

from there, even somebody as mild as Ray Heaney's father Ed, he would

announce "I'm from Butte" and his chin would shoot out a couple of

inches on that up-sound of Butte. In the midst of all this wide

Montana landscape a city where shifts of men tunneled like gophers.

Butte, the copper kingdom. Butte, the dark mineral pocket. Or the

other thing that was always said: "Butte's a hole in the ground and

so's a grave." That, I heard any number of times in the Two country.

I think the truth may have been that parts of Montana like ours were

apprehensive, actually a little scared, of Butte. There seemed to be

something spooky about a place that lived by eating its own guts,

which is the way mining sounded to us. Butte I would definitely surely

have to see someday. And the Big Hole Basin. As Wisdom Johnson told it,
stacker team job; it consisted

...
as haying season approached in the Big Hole the hay hands--they called them hay diggers down there, which I also liked--began

to gather about a week ahead of time. They sifted in, "jungled up"
creekside
in the willows at the edge of town, and visited and gossiped and just
laid about until haying started. I liked the notion of that, the
gathering, the waiting. Definitely the Big Hole would be on my hay
rake route.

And the dry Ingomar.
The dry Sumatra country down there in the southeastern part of the
state, where Walter Kyle had done his hotel style of sheep ranching.

The town water supply was a tank car, left off on the railroad siding
each week. Walter told of coming back to town from sheep camp one late fall
day and seeing flags of celebration flying. His immediate thought
was that somebody had struck water, "but it turned out to be just
the armistice ending the war." Havre and the High Line country.

Fort Peck dam. Miles City. Billings. Lewistown. White Sulphur
Springs. Red Lodge. Bozeman and the
green Gallatin Valley. For that matter, Missoula. Montana seemed
to be out there waiting for me, if I only could become old enough
to get there.
But. There's always a "but" when you think about going everywhere and doing everything. But how old was that, when I would be advanced enough to sample Montana to the full?

North of the ears strange things will happen. Do you know who kept coming to mind, as I thought my way hither and thither from those Noon Creek hay meadows? Stanley Meixell. Stanley who had gone cowboying in Kansas when he was a hell of a lot younger than I was. Stanley who there in the cabin during our camping trip told me of his wanderings, down to Colorado and Wyoming and over into the Dakotas, in and out of jobs. Stanley who evidently so much preferred the wandering life that he gave up being a forest ranger, to pursue it. Stanley who could plop himself on a bar stool on the Fourth of July and be found by Velma Simms. But Stanley who also looked worn down, played out and overboozed, by the footloose way of life. The example of Stanley bothered me no little bit. If the wanderer's way was as alluring as it seemed from my seat on the scatter rake, how then did I account for Stanley's the eroded look of Stanley's eyes?
Almost before I knew it, the first portion of our haying was over and we were moving the equipment onto the benchland for the ten days or so of putting up the big field of dry-land alfalfa there.

"The alfalfa field," as Perry Fox called it.

This was another turn of the summer I looked forward to with interest, this haying for the alfalfa field was far enough from the Reese ranch house that we didn't go in at noon for dinner. Now began field lunches.

My stomach aside, why did I look forward to this little season of field lunches? I think the answer must be that the field lunches on the bench constituted a kind of ritual that I liked. Not that I would want to eat every meal of my life in the stubble of a hayfield, but for ten days or so, it was like camping out or being on an expedition; possibly a little like "jungling up" the way the Big Hole hayhards started off. Whatever, the field lunch routine went like this.
The field lunches on the bench constituted a kind of ritual.
A few minutes before noon, here came Marie in the pickup. She had with her the chuck box, the old Reese family wooden one with cattle brands burned everywhere on its sides, and when a couple of us slid it back to the tailgate and lifted it down and waited and opened it, in there were two or three kinds of sandwiches wrapped in a dishtowel and a potato or macaroni salad, and a gallon jar of cold tea or lemonade, and bread and butter and jam, and pickles, and radishes and new garden carrots, and a pie or cake. Each of us found a dab of shade around the power buckrake or the pickup—my preference was to sit on the running board of the pickup; somehow it seemed more like a real meal when I sat up to eat—and then we ploughed into the lunch. Afterward, which is to say the rest of the noon hour, Pete was a napper, with his hat down over his eyes. I never was; I was afraid I might miss something. Clayton too was open-eyed, in that silent sentry way of all the Hebner kids had.

Perry and Bud meanwhile each rolled himself a smoke. That was the cue for Wisdom to pull out his sack of Bull Durham, pat his shirt pocket, then say to Perry or Bud, "You got a Bible on you?" One or the other would loan him the packet of cigarette papers and he'd roll himself one. Strange how a guy could always have tobacco but perpetually
to justify the report to my father: All tight as ice-strings.

While I was cross-examining the pack ropes my father had been
looking back out over the country behind us. Since we're this far along,
he decided, maybe we might as well eat some lunch.

The view rather than his stomach guided him in that choice, I believe.
be out of papers, which were the half of smoking that cost almost
nothing, but that was Wisdom for you.

The womanly presence of Marie, slim and dark, sitting in the
shade of the pickup beside the chuck box, posed the need for another
ritual. As coffee and iced tea caught up with kidneys, we males one
after another would rise, carefully casual, and saunter around to
the far side of the haystack and do our deed. Then saunter back,
trying to look like we'd never been away and Marie showing no least
sign that we had.

Eventually Pete would rouse himself. He not only could nap at
the drop of an eyelid, he woke up just as readily. "I don't suppose
characters you gave finished this field while I was resting my eyes, did you?"
Then he was on his feet, saying the rest of the back-to-work message:

"Until they invent hay that puts itself up, I guess we got to."
Our last day of haying the benchland alfalfa brought two events out of the ordinary.

The first came at once, when I headed Blanche and Fisheye to start the morning by raking the southwest corner of the field to rake there a while. Maybe a

quarter of a mile farther from where I was lay a coulee, along that

nice grassy slope of Breed Butte. It was part of Walter Kyle's place, and with Walter summering up in the mountains with his sheep, Dode Withrow always put up the hay of this coulee for shares on shares. The Withrow stacking crew had got set up the afternoon before—I could

pick out Dode over there, still with a cast on his leg, and I could all

but hear Dode on the topic of trying to run a haying crew with his leg set in cement. If I hadn't been so content about haying for Pete, Dode would have been my choice of somebody to work for.

Maybe scatter rakers are all born with similar patterns of behavior in them, but in any case, at the same time I was working the corner of our field the Withrow raker driver was doing the nearest corner of theirs. Naturally I studied how he was going about it, and a minute or so of that showed me that he wasn't a he, but Marcella Withrow.

I have no idea what the odds are on a coincidence like that—

Marcella and me having been the only ones in our class those 8 years.
seemed to elude my father, but he could be nimble enough in the short run. I wasn't without some practice at girling. And Bet was worth extra effort.

The McCaskill-Roose marriage ensued, and a year or so later, Alec ensued. Which then meant that my father and mother were supporting themselves and a youngster by a job which my father had been given because he was single and didn't need much wage. This is the brand of situation you can find yourself in without much effort in Montana, but that it is common does not make it any damn bit more acceptable.

I am sure that the memory of that predicament at the start of my parents' married life lay large behind their qualms about what Alec and I might do. If I had such qualms, I'm sure I didn't realize it.

My father especially wanted no repeat, in any son of mine, of a season-by-season struggle for livelihood. I knew our family ruckus was more complicated than just that. Anything ever is. But if amid the previous evening's contention my father and Alec could have been put under oath, each treating to the deepest of the truths in him, my father would have had to say something like: I don't want you making my mistakes over again. And Alec to him: Your mistakes were yours,
of grade school at South Fork, and the only English Creek ones in our particular high school class in Gros Ventre, and now both doing the same job, in the same hay neighborhood. Anyway, it made caused me to peek me grin. It also made me peek around with care, to be sure that I later wouldn't be liable for any razzing from our crew, and when the coast looked clear I waved to Marcella. She did the same, maybe even to checking over her shoulder against the razzing possibility, and we rattled past one another and raked our separate meadows. Some news to tell Ray Heaney the next time I got to town, anyway.

The other event occurred at noon, and this one went by the name of Toussaint Rennie.

He arrived in the pickup with Marie and the lunch. "I came to make sure," Toussaint announced, his tan gullied face solemn as Solomon. "Whether you men build haystacks right side up."

Actually the case was that Toussaint was through with ditch-riding for awhile, with everybody harvesting instead of irrigating, and Marie had gone up to the Two Medicine to fetch for him for the day. blood-and-soulmates. What conversations went on between those two soulmates, I've always wished I could have overheard. The gab between the hay crew and
Toussaint was pretty general, though, until we were done eating.

Pete then retired to his nap spot, and Perry and Bud and eventually
Wisdom lit up their smokes, and so on. A little time passed,
then Toussaint leaned from where he was sitting and laid his hand on the
chuck box. "Perry," he called over to Perry Fox. "We ate out of
this, a time before."

"That we have," agreed Perry. "But Marie's style of grub is
a whole helluva lot better."

Toussaint put his finger to the F burnt into the end of the
chuck box. "Dan Floweree." The finger moved to the 9R brand on
the box's side. "Louis Robare." To the E beside it: "Billy Ulm."

Then to the lid, where the next one had been burnt

"This one you know best, Perry."

I straightened up. It had come to me where Perry and Toussaint
had first eaten out of this chuck box, when those brands were first
seared into its wood. The roundup of 1882, from the elbow of the
Teton River to the Canadian line; the one Toussaint told my father about, the one he said was the biggest ever in this part of Montana.

Nearly 300 men, the ranchers and their cowhands and horse wranglers and night herders and cooks—40 tents it took, to hold them all.

Each morning the riders fanned out in half circles of about 15 miles' ride and rounded in the cattle for sorting; each afternoon the branding fires of the several outfits sent smoke above the prairie as the irons wrote ownership onto living cowhide. When the big sweep was over, coulees and creek bottoms searched out over an area the size of some eastern states, about 100,000 head of cattle were accounted for.

"Davis-Hauser-Stuart," Perry was saying of the brand on the chuck box lid. "My outfit at the time."

"DHS, the Damn Hard Sittin'."

Wisdom Johnson was beginning to catch up with the conversation.

"Where was this you're talking about?"

"All in through here," said Perry with a swing of his head from shoulder to shoulder. "Roundin' up cattle."
"Cattle?" Wisdom cast a look around the benchland, as if a herd might be out there this very moment. "Around here?" It did seem a lot to believe, that this alfalfa field and the farmland to the east of us once was a grass heaven for cows.

"Everywhere from the Teton to Canada, those old outfits had cattle," Perry affirmed. "If you could find the buggers."

Bud Dolson spoke up. "When'd all this take place?"

"1882?" queried Wisdom. "Perry, how ungodly old are you?"

Perry pointed a thumb at Toussaint. "Younger'n him."

"Everybody is."

How can pieces of time leap in and out of each other the way they do? There I sat, that noon, listening to Toussaint and Perry speak of eating from a chuckwagon box all those years ago; and hearing myself question my mother about how she and her mother and Pete were provisioned from the same chuck box on their St. Mary's wagon trip a quarter of a century ago; and watching Pete, snoozing there in the shade of the backrack, simultaneously my admired uncle and the boy who hollered the horses at St. Mary's.
Malden shook his head. He had thought it thoroughly, and the depth of

Isidor on one of the higher trails in this part of the mountains,

where a misstep by one pack horse might pull all the rest into a
tumble a few thousand feet down the slope, when Isidor turned in his

saddle and called: Mac, if we was to roll this packstring right about

here, the bastards'd roll till they stunk.

Since the lookout gear and our food only amounted to a load for
one horse it hadn't been necessary to have Isidor for this counting

trip of ours. But even absent he had had his influence that morning

as I arranged the packs on Brownie/Homer under my father's scrutiny,

both of us total converts to Isidor's perpetual preaching that in

continues...
Toussaint and the history that went everywhere with him set me to thinking. Life and people were a kind of flood around me this summer, yet for all my efforts I still was high and dry so far as one point of the past was concerned. When Toussaint climbed to his feet to visit the far side of the alfalfa stack, I decided. Hell, he himself was the one who brought the topic up, back at the creek picnic on the Fourth. You are a campjack these days. And an outhouse engineer and a dawn rider and a hay equipment mechanic and a scatter raker, and an inquisitive almost-15-year-old. I got up and followed Toussaint around the haystack.

"Jick," he acknowledged me. "You are getting tall. Mac and Beth will need a stepladder to talk to you."

"Yeah, I guess," I contributed, but my altitude was not what I wanted discussed. As Toussaint tended to his irrigation and I to mine, I asked: "Toussaint, what can you tell me about Stanley Meixell? I mean, I don't know him real well. That time up in the Two, I was only lending him a hand with his camptending, is all."

"Stanley Meixell," Toussaint intoned. "Stanley was the ranger. When the national forest was put in."

"Yeah, I know that. But more what I was wondering--did he and my folks have a run-in, sometime? I can't quite figure out what they think of Stanley."
"But you," said Toussaint. "You do thinking, too, what is it you think of Stanley?"

He had me there. "I don't just know. I've never come up against anybody just like him."

Toussaint nodded. "That is Stanley," he affirmed. "You know more than you think you do."

Well, there I was as usual. No more enlightened than when I started. The chronic condition of Jack McCaskill, 1½ 11/12 years, prospects for a cure debatable.

At least the solace of scatter raking remained. Or so I thought. As I say, this day I have just told about was the one that put an end to the benchland alfalfa. A last week of baying, back down on the Noon Creek meadows, awaited.

Even yet I go over and over in my mind the happenings which that last week was holding in store. Talk about a chain of events. You could raise and lower the anchor of an ocean liner on the string of links that began to happen now.
will not even have to go that far if we meet a merchantman or supply ship along the way. English, Spanish, Americans or the devil, so long as they're not Russians.
Our new venue for haying was the old Ramsay homestead. The "upper place," my mother and Pete both called it by habit, because it was the part of the Reese ranch farthest up Noon Creek, farthest in toward the mountains. "The meadows there were small but plentiful, tucked into the willow bends of Noon Creek, the way pieces of a jigsaw puzzle clasp into one another. Pete always left the Ramsay hay until last because its fields were so hard to reach—buckrake; in some cases he had to drive out of sight around two or three bends of the creek to bring in enough hay for a respectable stack. "You spend all your damn time here going instead of doing," was his unfond sentiment.

For me on the scatter rake, though, the Ramsay place was just fine. Almost any direction I sent Blanche and Fisheye prancing toward, there stood the mountains or the mountains for me to lean my eyes on. In this close to them, the Rockies took up more than half the edge of the earth, which seemed only their fair proportion. And knowing the reefs and peaks as I did I could judge where each sheep allotment was, up there in my father's forest. Walter Kyle atop Roman Reef with his sheep and his telescope. Andy Gustafson with one of the Busby bands, under the middle of the reef where I had camped him; farther south, Sanford Hebner in escape from his family name and situation. Closer toward Flume Gulch and the North Fork, whatever human improvement had
replaced Canada Dan as herder of the other Busby band. Lower down, in the mix of timber and grass slopes, Pat Hoy and the Withrow sheep; and the counting vee where my father and I talked and laughed with Dode. Already it was like going back to another time, to think about that first day of the counting trip.

The upper place, the old Ramsay place, always presented me new prospects of thought besides its horizons, though. For it was there that I was born. Alec and I both, in the Ramsay homestead house that still stands there today, although abandoned ever since my father quit as the Noon Creek association rider and embarked us into the Forest Service life. I couldn't have been but a year or so old when we moved away, yet I felt some regard for this site. An allegiance, even, for a bond of that sort happens when you have been the last to live at a place. Or so I think. Gratitude that it offered a roof over your head for as long as it did, this may be, and remorse that only emptiness is your successor there.

September children, Alec and I, native Noon Creekers. And my mother's birthplace down the creek at the Reese ranch house itself. Odd to think that of the four of us at the English Creek ranger station all those years, the place that answered to the word "home" in each of us, only my father originated on English Creek, he alone was our link to Scotch Heaven.
and the American origins of the McCaskills. We Americans scatter fast.

And something odder yet. In a physical sense, here at the upper place I was more distant from Alec than I had been all summer; the Double W lay half the length of Noon Creek from where my rake now wheeled and glided. Mentally, though, this advent to our mutual home ground was a kind of reunion with my brother. Or at least with thoughts of him. While I held the reins of Blanche and Fisheye as they clopped along, I wondered what saddle horse Alec might be riding.

When we moved the stacker from one site to the next, I thought of Alec on the move too, likely patrolling Double W fences this time of year, performing his quick mending on any barbwire or post that needed it. By this stage of haying Wisdom Johnson a time or two a day could be heard remembering the charms of Bouncing Betty, on First Avenue South in Great Falls. I wondered how many times a week Alec was managing to ride into Gros Ventre and see Leona. Leona. I wondered—well, just say I wondered.

With all this new musing to be done, the first day of haying the Ramsay meadows went calmly enough.
The first day of haying the Ramsay meadows was calm-enough.

A Monday, that was, a mild day following what had been a cool and cloudy Sunday. Wisdom Johnson, I remember, claimed we were now having so far up into the polar regions that he might have to put his shirt on. Anyway, a Monday, a getting-underway day.

The morning of the second Ramsay day, though, began unordinarily. I started to see so as soon as Pomy and I were coming down off the benchland into the Reese ranch buildings. My mind as usual was at that point on sour milk soda biscuits and fried eggs and venison sausage and other breakfast splendors as furnished by Marie, but I couldn't help watching the other rider who always approached the Reeses' at about the time I did. That of course was Clayton Hebner, for as I'd be descending from my benchland route Clayton would be riding in from the Hebner place on the North Fork, having come around the opposite side of Breed Butte from me.

Always Clayton was on that same weary mare my father and I had seen the two smaller Hebner jockeys trying to urge into motion, at the outset of our counting trip, and always he came plodding in at the same pace and maybe even in the same hooftracks as the morning before.

The first few mornings of haying I had waved to Clayton, but received
I was married to him. She gave a small downcast smile as I handed her the bundle, said to me Thank you mr. Dick, and retreated back inside.
no response. And I didn't deserve any. I ought to have known

Hebners didn't go in for waving. But etiquette of greeting was not

what now had my attention. This particular morning, Clayton across

the usual distance between us looked _somehow larger_ looked _somehow slouchy, as if he might have nodded off in the saddle_. looked _somehow--well, the word that comes to mind is dormant._

I had unsaddled Pony and was turning her into the pasture beside

the barn when it became evident why _Clayton Hebner didn't seem himself this morning. He wasn't._

"Hello there, Jick!" came the bray of Good Help Hebner. "Unchristly

hour of the day to be out and about, ain't it?"

_"Clayton buggered his ankle up," Good Help was explaining in a fast yelp. Even before the sire of the Hebner clan managed to unload himself from the swaybacked mare, Pete had appeared in the yard with an expression on his face that told me ranch house walls did nothing to dim the identification of Good Help Hebner. "Sprained the goshdamn thing when him and Melvin was grab-assing around after supper last night," Good Help continued to the two of us. "I tell you, Pete, I just don't know--"_
—what's got into kids these days, I finished for Good Help in my mind before he blared it out.

Yet just about the time you think you can recite every forthcoming point of conversation from a Good Help Hebner, that's when he'll throw you for a loop. As now, when Good Help sped on to this:

"Ought not to leave a neighbor in the lurch, though, Pete. So I'll take the stacker driving for you for a couple days till Clayton mends up."

Pete looked as though he'd just been offered something nasty on the end of a stick.

But there was no way around the situation. Someone to drive the stacker team was needed, and given that 12-year-old Clayton had been performing the job, there was an outside chance that Good Help could, too. Maybe.

"Dandy," said Pete without meaning a letter of it. "Come on in and sit up for breakfast. Then Jick can sort you out on the horses Clayton's been using."
As I'd be approaching from my benchland route, Clayton Hebner would be riding in from the North Fork, having come around the