

TWO

This will mark the fifteenth Fourth of July in a row that Gros Ventre has mustered a creek picnic, a rodeo and a dance. Regarding those festivities, ye editor's wife inquires whether somebody still has her big yellow potato-salad bowl from last year; the rodeo will feature \$140 in prize money; and the dance music will again be by Nola Atkins, piano, and Jeff Swan, fiddle.

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, June 29

}
}
} *Thurs. -
perpetual
calendar, 1939*

I have to honestly say that the next few weeks of this remembered summer look somewhat pale in comparison with my Stanley episode.

Only in comparison, though.

You can believe that I arrived back to English Creek from the land of shepherders and packhorses in no mood to take any further guff from that father of mine. What in Holy H. Hell was that all about, him and Stanley Meixell pussyfooting around each other the way they had when they met there on the mountain, then before it was over my father handing me over to Stanley like an orphan? Some counting trip, that one. I could spend the rest of the summer just trying to dope out why and what

add

^{well}
You might ask, why didn't I tackle my father with all these. But

Naturally he was nowhere on hand when Stanley and I rode in to the ranger station, and for the next couple days after that I still was so twanked off at him that I wasn't saying much about anything, and then this new development came up. Considering that my bill of goods against my father was so long and fresh, his next main news caught me by entire surprise.

and who, if I let myself. Considering, then, that my bill of goods against my father was so long and fresh, life's next main development caught me by entire surprise. This same parent who had just lent me as a towing service for a whiskeyfied geezer trying to find his way up the Rocky Mountains--this identical father now announced that he would be off the English Creek premises for a week, and I hereby was elevated into being the man of the house.

"Your legs are long enough by now that they reach the ground," he provided by way of justification the supertime this was unveiled, "so I guess that qualifies you to run this place, don't you think?"

Weather brought this about, as it did so much else that summer. The cool wet mood of June continued and about the middle of the month } our part of Montana had ^{its} the solidest rain in years, a toad-drowner } that settled in around noon and poured on and on into the night. } That storm delivered snow onto the mountains--several inches fell in } the Big Belts south beyond Sun River, and that next morning here in the Two, along the high sharp parts of all the peaks a white skift shined, fresh-looking as a sugar sprinkle. You could bet, though, there were a bunch of perturbed shepherders up there looking out their wagon doors at it and not thinking sugar. Anyway, since that storm was a straightforward douser without any lightning and left the forests so sopping that there was no fire danger for a while, the desk jockeys at ~~the national forest office~~ ^{headquarters} in Great Falls saw this as a chance to ship a couple of rangers from the Two over to

Region headquarters for a refresher course. Send them back to school, as it was said. Both my father and Murray Tomlin of the Blacktail Gulch station down on Sun River had been so assiduous about evading this in the past that the finger of selection now never wavered whatsoever; it pointed the pair of them to Missoula for a week of fire school. }

The morning came when my father appeared in his Forest Service monkey suit--uniform, green hat, pine tree badge--and readied himself to collect Murray at the Blacktail Gulch station, from where they would drive over to Missoula together. }

"Mazoola," he was still grumbling. "Why don't they send us to Hell to study fire and be done with it? What I hear, the mileage is probably about the same."

My mother's sympathy was not rampant. "All that surprises me is that you've gotten by this long without having to go. Have you got your diary in some pocket of that rig?"

"Diary," my father muttered, "diary, diary, diary," patting various pockets. "I never budge without it." And went to try find it.

I spectated with some anticipation. My mood toward my father hadn't uncurdled entirely, and some time on my own, some open space without him around to remind me I was half-sore at him, looked just dandy to me. As did this first-ever designation of me as the man of the house. Of course, I was well aware my father hadn't literally meant that I was to run English Creek in his absence. Start with the basic that nobody ran my mother. As for station matters, my father's assistant ranger Paul Eliason was strawbossing a fire-trail crew not }

✓
✓
incl of F/A
article in
FS file

far along the South Fork and the new dispatcher, Chet Barnouw, was
up getting familiar with the lookout sectors and the telephone setup
which connected them to the ranger station. Any vital forest business
would be handled by one of those two. No, I had no grandiose illusions.
I was to make the check

on Walter Kyle's place sometime during the week and help Isidor Pronovost
line out his pack string when he came to pack supplies up to the fire
lookouts and do some barn cleaning and generally be on hand for anything
my mother thought up. Nothing to get wild-eyed about.

Even so, I wasn't prepared for what lay ahead when my father
came back from his diary hunt, looked across the kitchen at me, said
"Step right out here for some free entertainment," and led me around
back of the ranger station.

There he went to the side of the outhouse, being a little gingerly
about it because of his uniform. Turned. Stepped off sixteen paces--
why exactly sixteen I don't know, but likely it was in Forest Service
regulations somewhere. And announced: "It's time we moved Republican
headquarters. How're your shovel muscles?"

So here was my major duty of "running" English Creek in my father's
absence--digging the new hole to site the toilet over.

Let me be clear. The job itself I didn't particularly mind.
Shovel work is honest sweat. Even yet I would sooner do something
manual than to diddle around with some temperamental damn piece of
machinery. No, my grouse was of a different feather than that. I
purely was perturbed that here was one more instance of my father

blindsiding me with a task I hadn't even dreamt of. First Stanley, now this outhouse deal. Here was a summer, it was beginning to seem like, when every time I turned around some new and strange avenue of endeavor was already under my feet and my father was pointing me along it and chirping, "Right this way--"

All this and I suppose more was on my mind as my father's pickup vanished over the rise of the Gros Ventre road and I contemplated my work site.

Moving an outhouse may not sound like the nicest occupation in the world. But neither is it as bad as you probably think. Here is the program: When my father got back from Missoula we would simply lever up each side of the outhouse high enough to slip a pole under to serve as a skid, then nail crosspieces to keep the pair of skids in place and with a length of cable attached to the back of the pickup, snake the building over atop the new pit and let it down into place, ready for business.

So the actual moving doesn't amount to all that much. The new pit, though. There's the drawback. The pit, my responsibility, was going to take considerable doing. Or rather, considerable digging.

At the spot my father had paced to and marked, I pounded in four stakes with white kitchen string from one to another to represent the outhouse dimensions, inasmuch as ours was a two-holer, as was considered good-mannered for a family, it made a considerable rectangle; I guess about half again bigger than a cemetery grave, and now all I faced was to excavate the stringed-in space to a depth of about seven feet.

The way I would do it.

Seven feet divided by, umm, parts of five days, what with the ride I had to make to check on Walter Kyle's place and helping Isidor ^{load} with his pack string and general choring for my mother. I doped out that if I did a dab of steady digging each afternoon I could handily complete the hole by Saturday when my father was due back. Jobs which can be broken down into stints that way, where you know that if you put in a certain amount of daily effort you'll overcome the chore, I have always been able to handle. It's the more general errands of life that daunt me.

I don't mean to spout an entire sermon on this outhouse topic, but advancing into the ground does get your mind onto the earth, in more ways than one. That day when I started in on the outhouse rectangle I of course first had to cut through the sod, and once that's been shoveled out, it leaves a depression about the size of a cellar door. A sort of entryway down into the planet, it looked like. Unearthing that sod was the one part of this task that made me uneasy, and it has taken me these years to realize why. A number of times since, I have been present when sod was broken to become a farmed field. And in each instance I felt the particular emotion of watching that land be cut into furrows for the first time ever--ever; can we even come close to grasping what that means?--and the native grass being tipped on its side and then folded under the brown wave of turned earth. Anticipation, fascination, ³ part of the feeling can be described with those words or ones close to them. It can be understood, watching the ripping-plow } cut the patterns that will become a grainfield, that the homesteaders

who came to Montana in their thousands believed they were seeing a new life uncovered for them.

Yet there's a further portion of those feelings, at least in me. Uneasiness. The uneasy wondering of whether that ripping-plow is honestly the best idea. Smothering a natural crop, grass, to try to nurture an artificial one. Not that I, or probably anyone else with the least hint of a qualm, had any vote in the matter. Both before and after the Depression--which is to say, in times when farmers had money enough to pay wages--kids such as I was in this particular English Creek summer were merely what you might call hired arms; brought in to pick rocks off the newly broken field. And not only the newly broken, for more rocks kept appearing and appearing. In fact in our part of Montana, rock picking was like sorting through a perpetual landslide. Anything bigger than a grapefruit--the heftiest rocks might rival a watermelon--was dropped onto a stoneboat pulled by a team of horses or tractor, and the eventual load was dumped alongside the field. No stone fences built as in New England or over in Ireland or someplace. Just raw heaps, the slag of the plowed prairie.

my summer work for Tony Meyer

same as above; Dufferin country way of doing it

I cite all this because by my third afternoon shift of digging, I had confirmed for myself the Two country's reputation for being a toupee of grass on a cranium of rock. Gravel, more accurately, there so close to the bed of English Creek, which in its bottom was 100% small stones. We had studied in school that glaciers bulldozed through this part of the world, but until you get to handling the evidence shovelful by shovelful the fact doesn't mean as much to you.

I am dead sure this happened on the third afternoon, a Wednesday, because that was the day of the month the English Creek ladies' club met. There were enough wives along the creek to play two tables of cards, and so have a rare enough chance to visit, and club day always found my mother in a fresh dress right after ~~lunch~~, ready to go. This day, Alice Van Bebber stopped by to pick her up. "My, Jick, you're growing like a weed," Alice crooned out the car window to me as my mother got in the other side. Alice always was flighty as a chicken looking in a mirror--living with Ed likely would do it to anybody--and away the car zoomed, up the South Fork road toward Withrows', as it was Midge's turn to be hostess.

} Grandma +
Withall club

*without males cluttering up the scene;
our noon meal,*

I know too that when I went out for my comfort station shift, I began by doing some work with a pick. Now, I didn't absolutely have to swing a pick on this project. With a little effort the gravel and the dirt mixed with it were shovelable enough. But I simply liked to do occasional pick work. Liked the different feel and rhythm of that tool, operating overhand as it does rather than the perpetual reach-down and-heave of shoveling. Muscles too need some variety in life, I have always thought.

} my experience
in making
gardens

So I was loosening the gravelly earth at the bottom of the hole with swings of the pick, and on the basis of Alice Van Bebber's blab was wondering to myself why a grownup never seemed to say anything to me that I wanted to hear, and after some minutes of this, stopped for breath. And in looking up, saw just starting down ~~the~~ rise of the county road a string of three horses.

toward the ranger station from

✓ Sorrel and black and ugly gray. ✓

} final ms
p. 94

Or, reading back down the ladder of colors, ✓ Bubbles and the pack
mare and the saddle horse that Stanley Meixell was atop. ✓

I didn't think it through. I have no idea why I did it. But I
ducked down and sat in the bottom of the hole.

The moment I did, of course, I began to realize what I had committed
myself to. They say nine-tenths of a person is above the ears, but I
swear the proportion sometimes gets reversed in me. Not that I
wasn't safely out of sight squatting down there; when I'd been standing up }
working, my excavation by now was about shoulder-deep on me. No problem } at least
there. No problem so long as Stanley didn't get a direct look down into } 5'
the hole. But what if that happened? What if Stanley stopped at the
station, for some reason or other? And, say, being stopped anyway he
decided to use the outhouse, and as he was headed out there decided to
amble over to admire this pit of mine? What then? Would I pop up
like a jack-in-the-box? I'd sure as the dickens look just as silly as
one.

I was also learning that the position I had to squat in wasn't
the world's most comfortable. And it was going to take a number of
minutes for Stanley and company to saunter down from the rise and pass
the station and go off up the North Fork road, before I could safely }
stand up. Just how many minutes began to interest me more than anything }
else. Of course I had no watch, and the only other way I knew to keep
track of time was to count it off like each second between lightning and
thunder, one-a-thousand, two-a-thousand-- But the problem there, how
much time did I have to count off? That I'd have to work out in my

head, Alec style. Let's see, say Stanley and his horses were traveling 5 miles an hour, which was the figure ~~The Major~~^{Kelly} was always raising hell with the Forest Service packers about, insisting they by-god-and-by-damn ought to be able to average that. But The Major had never encountered Bubbles. Bubbles surely would slow down any enterprise at least half a mile an hour, dragging back on his lead rope like a tug-of-war contestant the way he did. Okay, $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles an hour considering Bubbles, and it was about a mile from the crest of the county road to down here at the ranger station; then from here to where Stanley would pass out of sight beyond the North Fork brush was, what, another third of a mile, maybe more like half a mile. So now: for Stanley to cover one mile at $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles an hour would take--well, 5 miles an hour would be 12 minutes; 4 miles an hour would be 15 minutes; round the $4\frac{1}{2}$ mile an hour pace off to say 13 minutes; then the other $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ mile would take somewhere around 6 minutes, wouldn't it be? So, 13 and 6, 19 minutes. Then 19 times 60 (60 seconds to the minute) for the total I'd need to count to, and that was, was, was...1100-something.

This hunching down in a toilet hole was all getting dismal enough without me reciting one a-thousand, two a-thousand, three a-thousand, all the way up to 1100-something. Besides, I had no idea how much time I had already spent, in the calculating.

Besides again, numbers weren't really what needed thinking on. The point to ponder was, why was I hiding anyway? Why had I plunked myself into this situation? Why didn't I want to face Stanley? Why had I let the sight of him hoodoo me like this? Some gab about the

weather, inquire as to how his hand was getting along, say I had to get back to digging, and that would have been that. But no, here I was, playing turtle in the bottom of an outhouse pit. Sometimes there's nobody stranger in this world than ourselves.

So I squatted and mulled. There ^{is} ~~is~~ this for sure about doing those two together, they fairly soon convince you that you can think better standing up. Hell with it, I eventually told myself. If I had to pop up and face Stanley with my face all pie, so be it.

I uninked and came upright with some elaborate arm-stretching, as if I'd just had a nice break from work down there. Then treated myself to a casual yawn and began eyeing around over the rim of the pit to determine which direction I had to face embarrassment from.

And found nobody.

No Stanley. No Bubbles. Nothing alive anywhere around, except one fourteen-year-old fool.

"So," my mother inquired upon return from her ladies' club, "everything peaceful around here?"

"Downright lonesome," I said back.

Now let me tell of my mother's contribution to that week.

It ensued around mid-day on Thursday. First thing that morning my father's packer Isidor Pronovost showed up, and I spent the front of the day working as cargodier for Isidor, helping him make up packs of supplies to take up to the fire lookouts. ~~Isidor~~ ("Balance," Isidor sermoned as he always did. "We got to balance the ~~sonsabitches~~,
buggers

} Thurs. -
Bleasner
put in day
} spelling
principle of
bombardier

Jick, that's every secret of it." Harking back to my Bubbles experience I thought to myself, don't I know it.) Then Isidor was not much more than out of sight with his pack string when here came my mother's brother, Pete Reese, English Creek was getting about as busy as Broadway.

Pete had driven into town from his ranch on Noon Creek on one errand or another, and now was looping home by way of English Creek to drop off our mail and see how we were faring. He stepped over and admired my progress on the outhouse hole-- "Everybody on the creek'll be wanting to patronize it. You thought of charging admission?" -- and handed me the few letters and that week's Gleaner. His doing so reminded me I was the temporary host of the place and I hurriedly invited, "Come on over to the house."

We no sooner were through the door ~~of the station~~ than my mother was saying to Pete, "You're staying for dinner, aren't you," more as declaration than question. So Pete shed his hat and offered that he supposed he could, "if it's going to be something edible." Pete got away with more with my mother than just about anyone else could, including my father. "Park your tongue then," she simply retorted, and went to work on the meal while Pete and I chinned about the green year.

That topic naturally was staying near the front of everybody's mind. By now the weather service was declaring this the ~~wettest~~ ^{coolest} June in Montana since 1916, and the wettest in almost as long, news which was more than welcome. In Montana too much rain is just about enough. All the while the country had been greening and greening, the crop and livestock forecasts were flourishing, too.

USDA
Climatological Data,
June '39 - in
Forest fire
scientific research
folder.
(almost as
long as
wettest since
1923)

} G# Trib
19 Jul '39

to be vague--even Pete, of the same straightforward lineage as my mother, now was pussyfooting to the effect that "all this rain, hay's going to be kind of late this year"--they clung to it.

"Before the Fourth?" my mother narrowed the specification.

"No, I don't suppose." It was interesting to see comments go back and forth between this pair; like studying drawings of the same face done by two different artists. Pete had what might be called the kernel of my mother's good looks: same neat nose, apple cheeks, roundish jaw, but proportioned smaller, thriftier. }

"The week after?"

"Could be," Pete allowed. "Were you going to feed us sometime today or what?"

Messages come in capsules as well as bottles. The content of "could be" was that no hay would be made by Pete Reese until after the Fourth of July and until then, I was loose in the world.

There during dinner, it turned out that Pete now was on the question end of the conversation:

"Alec been around lately?"

"Alec," my mother reported in obituary tones, "is busy Riding the Range."

"Day and night?"

"At least. Our only hope of seeing him is if he ever needs a clean shirt."

#

My personal theory is that a lot of misunderstanding followed my mother around just because of her way of saying. Lisabeth Reese McCaskill could give you the time of day and make you wonder why you had dared to ask. I recall once when I was about eleven that we were visited for the morning by Louise Bowen, wife of the ^{young} ranger at the Indian Head district } to the south of us. Cliff Bowen was newly assigned onto the Two, having held down an office job at Region headquarters in Missoula all the time before, and Louise was telling my mother how worried she was that her year-old, Donny, accustomed to town and a fenced yard, would wander } off ^{from} the station, maybe fall into the Teton River. I was in the other room, more or less reading a Collier's and minding my own business, but } I can still hear how my mother's response suddenly seemed to fill the whole house:

"Bell him."

There was a stretch of silence then, until Louise finally kind of peeped: "Beg pardon? I don't quite--"

"Put a bell on him. The only way to keep track of a wandering child is to hear him."

Louise left not all too long after that, and that was the extent of our visits from her. But I did notice, when my father drove down to borrow a saw-set from Cliff a month or so later and I rode along, that } Donny Bowen was toddling around with a lamb bell on him.

Pete was continuing on the topic of Alec. "Well, he's at that age--"

"Pete," she headed him off, "I know what age my own son is."

Indian Head
Rock between
Teton R.

Ann Nelson:
yes they
toddle at
that age

saw-set:
OK, dictionary

"So you do, Bet. But the number isn't all of it. You might try keep that in mind."

My mother reached to pass Pete some more fried spuds. "I'll try," she allowed. "I Will Try."

When we'd eaten and Pete declared "It's time I wasn't here" and headed home to Noon Creek, my mother immediately began drowning dirty dishes and I meanwhile remembered the mail I'd been handed, and fetched it from the sideboard where I'd put it down. There was a letter to my mother from Mr. Vennaman, the Gros Ventre ^{school superintendent} principal--even though Alec and I were gone from the English Creek school my mother still was on its school board and so had occasional dealings with the education muckymucks in Gros Ventre and Conrad--and a couple of Forest Service things for my father, probably the latest Kelleygrams. But what I was after was the Gleaner, thinking I'd let my dinner settle a little while

I read. As usual, I opened to page 5. The newspaper was always 8 pages and page 5 was always the At Random page, carrying Bill Reinking's own comments, and syndicated features about famous people or events, and local history, and even poetry or quotations if Bill felt like it. Random definitely was the right word for it, yet ^{every week} that page was a magnet for a mind like mine.

I'd been literary for maybe three minutes when I saw the names.

"Mom? You and Pete are in the paper."

She turned from where she was washing dishes and gave me her look that said, you had now better produce some fast truth.

I pinned down the newsprint evidence with my finger. "See, here."

president of
Value annual changed.
file card - Beth (Tom Howe, Grandma on rural sch. boards)

p. 5 a right-hand page

Acantha boilerplate page



25 Years Ago

in The Gleaner



Anna Reese and children Lisabeth and Peter visited Isaac Reese at St. Mary's Lake for three days last week. Isaac is providing the workhorses for the task of building the roadbed from St. Mary's to Babb. Isaac sends word through Anna that the summer's work on this and other Glacier National Park roads and trails is progressing satisfactorily.

As she read over my shoulder I thought about the journey that would have been in those days. Undoubtedly by democrat wagon, all } the way north from the Reese place on Noon Creek. Past the landmark } of Heart Butte, across the Two Medicine River, and then on even beyond } Cut Bank Creek. Very nearly to Chief Mountain, the last peak that could be seen on the northern horizon. I of course had been over that total route with my father, but only a piece at a time, on various riding trips and by pickup to the northernmost part. But to do the whole journey at once, by hoof and iron wheel, a woman and two kids, struck me as a notable expedition.

"Sounds like a long time in a wagon," I prompted cannily. "You never told me about that."

"Didn't I." And she turned and went back to her dishpan.

Well, sometimes you could prompt my mother, and sometimes you might as well try conversing with the stove poker.

I retreated into my hole, so to speak. Yet, you know how it is when you're doing something your body can take care of by itself. Your

mind is going to sneak off somewhere on its own. As the rest of me dug, mine was on that wagon journey with my mother and Pete and their mother.

There wouldn't have been the paved highway north to Browning and the Park then, just the old road as the wheels of the freight wagons had rutted it into the prairie. Some homesteads must have still existed between Gros Ventre and the Reservation boundary at Birch Creek, but probably not many. Those were the years when the Valier irrigation project was new and anybody who knew grain grew on a stem was over there around Lake Francis trying to be a farmer. Mostly empty country, then, except for livestock, all the way to Birch Creek and its ribbon-line of trees. Empty again from there north to Badger Creek, where I supposed some of the same Blackfeet families lived then as now. There near Badger the Reese wagon would have passed just west of the place where, a century and some before, Meriwether Lewis and the Blackfeet clashed. That piece of Reservation country to us was simply grass, until my father deduced from reading in a book of the Lewis and Clark journals that somewhere off in there near where Badger flows into the Two Medicine River was the place Lewis and his men killed a couple of Blackfeet over a stealing incident and began the long prairie war between whites and Indians. Passing that area in a pickup on paved highway never made that history seem real to me. I would bet it was more believable from ^a that wagon. Then up from Badger, the high benches to where the Two Medicine trenched deep through the landscape. Maybe another day and a half of travel beyond that, through Browning and west and then north across Cut Bank

Creek, and over the divide to St. Mary's, and there at the end of it }
all the road camp, its crews and tents and workhorses. In my imagi-
nation I saw it as somewhat like a traveling circus, but with go-devils }
and scrapers and other road machines instead of circus wagons. And
its ringmaster, my grandfather, Isaac Reese. He was the only one of
my grandparents yet alive when I became old enough to remember, and I
could just glimpse him in a corner of my mind. A gray-mustached
man at the head of the table whenever we had Sunday dinner at the
Reeses', using his knife to load his fork with food in a way which }
would have caused my mother to give Alec or me absolute hell if we had
dared try it. I gather, though, that Isaac Reese got away with consider-
ably more than that in life--I suppose any horse dealer worth his repu-
tation did--and it was a thriving Reese ranch there on Noon Creek that
Pete took over after the old man's death.

~~That~~ ^{This} Reese side of the family wandered into the conversation
whenever someone would learn that my mother, although she was married to
a man only a generation or so away from kilts, herself was just half-
Scottish. "The other half," my father would claim when he judged that
she was in a good enough mood he could get away with it, "seems to be
something like badger." Actually, that lineage was Danish. Isak Riis }
departed Denmark aboard the ship King Carl sometime in the 1880s, and the
pen of an immigration official greeted him onto American soil as Isaac
Reese. In that everybody-head-west-and-grab-some-land period, counting
was more vital than spelling anyway. By dint of what his eyes told him
on the journey west, Isaac arrived to North Dakota determined on a living

from workhorses. The Great Northern railroad was pushing across the top of the Western United States--this was when Jim Hill was promising to cobweb Dakota and Montana with railroad iron--and Isaac began as a teamster on the roadbed. His ways with horses and projects proved to be as sure as his new language was shaky. (My father claimed to have been on hand the famous time, years later, when Isaac couldn't find the words "wagon tongue" and ended up calling it "de Godtamn handle to de Godtamn vagon.")[#] Within days after sizing up the railroad situation "the old boy was writing back to every shirttail relative in Denmark for money to buy horses"--my father was always a ready source on Isaac, I guess greatly grateful to have had a father-in-law he both admired and got entertainment from--and soon Isaac had his own teams and drivers working on contract for the Great Northern.

When construction reached the east face of the Rockies, the mountains held Isaac. Why, nobody in the family ever could figure out. Certainly in Denmark he must never have seen anything higher than a barnyard manure pile. But while his horses and men worked on west through Maria's Pass as the railroad proceeded toward the coast, Isaac stayed and looked around. In a week or so he horsebacked south along the mountains toward Gros Ventre, and out of that journey, bought a homestead relinquishment which became the start of the eventual Reese ranch.

Isaac Reese was either shrewd as hell or lucky as hell. Even at my stage of life I am not entirely clear whether there is any appreciable difference between the two. By whichever guidance he lit here in a

Malone
+
Roads,
134+

Malone

2/10
E

region of Montana where a couple of decades of projects were standing in line waiting for a man with workhorses. The many miles of irrigation canals of the water schemes at Valier and Bynum and Choteau and Fairfield. Ranch reservoirs (ressavoys" to Isaac). The roadbed when the branch railroad was built north from Choteau to Pendroy. Street-grading when Valier was built onto the prairie. All those Glacier Park roads and trails. As each appurtenance was put onto the Two country and its neighboring areas, Isaac was on hand to realize money from it.

"And married a Scotchwoman to hang onto the dollars for him," my father always injected at this point. She was Anna Ramsay, teacher at the Noon Creek school. Her, I knew next to nothing about. Just that she died in the influenza epidemic during the war, and that in the wedding picture of her and Isaac that hung in my parent's bedroom she was the one standing and looking in charge, while Isaac sat beside her with his mustache drooping whimsically. Neither my mother nor my father ever said much about Anna Ramsay Reese--which helped sharpen my present curiosity, thinking about her trundling off to St. Mary's in that wagon. Like my McCaskill grandparents she simply was an absent figure back there, cast all the more into shadow by my father's supply of stories about Isaac.

In a sense, the first of those Isaac tales was the genesis of our family. The night my father, the young association rider, was going to catch Isaac by ambush and request my mother in marriage, Isaac greeted him at the door and before they were even properly sat down, had launched into a whole evening of horse topics, Clydesdales and Belgians and Morgans and fetlocks and withers and hocks ~~and pasterns~~. Never tell me a

Scandinavian harbors no sense of humor. ⁴ When my father at last managed to wedge the question in, Isaac tried to look taken aback, eyed him hard and repeated as if he was making sure: "marriage?" Or as my father said Isaac pronounced it: "mare itch?"

Then Isaac looked at my father harder yet and asked: "Tell me dis. Do you ever took a drink?"

My father figured honesty was the best answer in the face of public knowledge. "Now and then, yes, I do."

Isaac weighed that. Then he got to his feet and loomed over my father. "Ve'll took one now, den." And with Mason jar moonshine reached down from the cupboard, the pairing that began Alec and me was toasted.

When I considered that I'd done an afternoon's excavating, physically and mentally, I climbed out and had a look at the progress of my sanitation engineering. By now the pile of dirt and gravel stood high and broad, the darker tone on its top showing today's fresh shovel work and the drier faded-out stuff beneath, the previous days'. With a little imagination I thought I could even discern a gradation, like layers on a cake, of each stint of my shovelfuls of the Two country, Monday's, Tuesday's, Wednesday's, and now today's light-chocolate top. Damn interesting, the ingredients of this earth.

More to the immediate point, I was pleased with myself that I'd estimated the work into the right daily dabs. Tomorrow afternoon was going to cost some effort, because I was getting down so deep the

soil would need to be bucketed out. But the hole looked definitely finishable.

I must have been more giddy with myself than I realized, because when I went over to the chopping block to split wood for the kitchen woodbox, I found myself using the axe in rhythm with a song of Stanley's about the gal named Lou and what she was able to do with her wingwangwoo.

When I came into the kitchen with the armload, my mother was looking at me oddly.

"Since when did you take up singing?" she inquired.

"Oh, just feeling good," I guess," I said and dumped my cargo into the woodbox loud enough to try prove it.

"What was that tune, anyway?"

"Pretty Redwing," I hazarded. "I think."

That brought a further look from her. "While I'm at it I might as well fill the water bucket," I proposed, and got out of there.

After supper, lack of anything better to do made me tackle my mother on that long-ago wagon trip again. That is, I was doing something but it didn't exactly strain the brain. Since hearing Stanley tell about having done that winter of hair work a million years ago in Kansas, I had gotten mildly interested and was braiding myself a horsehair hackamore. I was discovering, though, that in terms of entertainment, braiding is pretty much like chewing gum with your fingers. So--

"Where'd you sleep?"

She was going through the Gleaner. "Sleep when?"

"That time. When you all went up to St. Mary's." I kept on with my braiding just as if we'd been having this continuing conversation every evening of our lives.

She glanced over at me, then said: "Under the wagon."

"Really? You?" Which drew me more of her attention than I was bargaining for. "Uh, how many nights?"

I got quite a little braiding done in the silence that answered that, and when I finally figured I had to glance up, I realized that she was truly studying me. Not just taking apart with a look: studying. Her voice wasn't at all sharp when she asked: "Jick, what's got your curiosity bump up?"

"I'm just interested, is all." Even to me that didn't sound like an overly profound explanation, so I tried to go on. "When I was with Stanley, those days campending, he told me a lot about the Two. About when he was the ranger. It got me interested in, uh, old times."

"What did he say about being ranger?"

"That he was the one here before Dad. And that he set up the Two as a national forest." It occurred to me to try her on a piece of chronology I had been attempting to work out ever since that night of my cabin binge. "What, was Dad the ranger at Indian Head while Stanley still was the ranger here?"

"For a while." ~~Maybe a year.~~

"Is that where I remember Stanley from?"

"I suppose."

"Did you and Dad neighbor back and forth with him a lot?"

"Some. What does any of that have to do with how many nights I slept under a wagon twenty-five years ago?"

She had a reasonable enough question there. Yet it somehow seemed to me that a connection did exist, that any history of a Two country person was alloyed with the history of any other Two country person. That some given sum of each life had to be added into every other, to find the total. But none of which sounded sane to say. All I did finally manage was: "I just would like to know something about things then. Like when you were around my age."

No doubt there was a response she had to bite her tongue to keep from making: that she wasn't sure she'd ever been this age I seemed to be at just now. Instead came: ⁹"All right. That wagon trip to St. Mary's. What is it you want to know about it?"

"Well, just--why was it you went?"

"Mother took the notion. My father had been away, up there, for some weeks. He often was, contracting horses somewhere." She rustled the Gleaner as she turned a page. "About like being married to a ranger," she added, but lightly enough to show it was her version of a joke.

"How long did that trip take then?" Now, in a car, it was a matter of a couple or three hours.

She had to think about that. After a minute: "Two and a half days. Two nights," she underscored for my benefit, "under the wagon. One at the Two Medicine and one at Cut Bank Creek."

"How come Cut Bank Creek? Why not in Browning?"

"My mother held the opinion that the prairie was a more civilized place than Browning."

"What did you do for food?"

"We ate out of a ~~belly~~^{chuck} box. That old one from chuckwagon days, with all the cattle brands on it. Mother and I cooked up what was necessary, before we left."

chuck

"Were you the only ones on the road?"

"Pretty much, yes. The mail stage still was running then. Somewhere along the way I ~~guess~~^{guess} we met it."

She could nail questions shut faster than I could think them up. Not deliberately, I see now. That was just the way she was, a person who put no particular importance on having made a prairie trek and seen a stagecoach in the process.

My mother seemed to realize that this wasn't exactly flowering into the epic tale I was hoping for. "Jick, that's all I know about it. We went, and stayed a few days, and came back."

Went, stayed, came. The facts were there but the feel of them wasn't.

"What about the road camp?" I resorted to next. "What do you remember about that?" The St. Mary's area is one of the most beautiful ones, with the mountains of Glacier National Park sheering up beyond the lake. The world looks to be all stone and ice and water there. Even my mother might have noticed some of that glory.

St. M's divide

Here she found a small smile. "Just that when we pulled in, Pete began helling all the horses."

She saw that didn't register with me.

"Calling out hello to the workhorses in the various teams," she explained. "He hadn't seen them for awhile, after all. 'Hello, Woodrow!' 'Hello, Sneezzer!' ^{Moses} Methusaleh. Runt. Copenhagen.

no # Mother let him go on with it until he came to a big gray mare called Second Wife. She never thought the name of that one was as funny as Father did."

There is this about history, you never know which particular ember of it is going to glow to life. As she told this, I could all but hear Pete helloing those horses, his dry voice making a chant which sang across that road camp. And the look on my mother told me she could, too.

Not to be too obvious, I braided a moment more. Then decided to try the other part of that St. Mary's scene. "Your own mother. What was she like?"

"That father of yours has been heard to say I'm a second serving of her."

Well, this at least informed me that old Isaac Reese hadn't gotten away with nearly as much in life as I'd originally thought. But now, how to keep this line of talk going--

"Was she a leaper too?"

"No," my mother outright laughed. "No, I seem to be the only one of that variety."

Probably our best single piece of family lore was that my mother leaped in with the century. The 29th of February of 1900, she was }
born on. Which of course meant that except when each leap year showed

up, she lacked a definite calendar date for her birthday. She herself never made anything of that, just let each off-year birthday be marked on whichever date seemed most convenient at the time, February 28th or March 1st. But either my father or Alec one year came up with the card-cut idea. So three years of every four, the bunch of us congregated at the table after the supper dishes were done and my mother shuffled a deck of cards. Likely not more than two or three quick riffles, because there was a pretty abrupt limit on how much she was willing to fool around. Then we all would make our predictions as to what manner of birthday year this seemed to be--tomorrow, or the next day-- and she cut the cards--a heart or diamond delivering her a last-of-February birthday, a club or spade a first-of-March. This particular year had been a red one, I recall, because she said at the time: "So I don't even get a day's grace any more." It sobers me to realize that when she made that plaint about the speed of time, she was not yet two-thirds of the age I am now.

my first
--"Why did I What?" The Gleaner was forgotten in front of her now, her gaze was on me: ^{not} her ~~particular~~ look that could skin a rock, *just a highly surprised once-over.*

I swear that what I'd had framed in mind was only further inquiry about my grandparents, how Anna Ramsay and Isaac Reese first happened to meet and when they'd decided to get married and so on. But somewhere a cog slipped, and what had fallen out of my mouth instead was: "Why'd you marry Dad?" *exchange?*

"Well, you know," I now floundered, searching for any possible shore, "what I mean, kids wonder about something like that. How we got here."

Another perilous direction, that one. "I don't mean, uh, how, exactly. More like why. Didn't you ever wonder yourself? Why your own mother and father decided to get married? I mean, how would any of us be here if those people back then hadn't decided the way they did? And I just thought, since we're talking about all this anyway, you could fill me in on some of it. Out of your own experience, sort of."

My mother looked at me for an eternity more, then shook her head. "One of them goes head over heels after anything blonde, the other one wants to know the history of the world. Alec and you--where did I get you two?"

I figured I had nothing further to lose by taking the chance: "That's sort of what I was asking, isn't it?"

"All right." She still looked skeptical of the possibility of common sense in me, but her eyes let up on me a little. "All right, Mr. Inquisitive. You want to know the makings of this family, is that it?"

I nodded vigorously.

She thought. Then: "Jick, a person hardly knows how to start on this. But you know, don't you, that I taught most of that--that one year at the Noon Creek school?"

I did know that chapter. That when my mother's mother, Anna Ramsay Reese, died in the 'flu epidemic of 1918, my mother came back from what was to have been her second year in college and became, in her mother's stead, the Noon Creek teacher.

"If it hadn't been for that, who knows what would have happened,"

she went on. "But that did bring me back from college, about the same time a long-g geared galoot named Varick McCaskill came back from the army. His ^{peps} father still ^{were} was in here up the North Fork. Scotch Heaven. So Mac was back in the country and the two of us had known each other-- oh, all our lives, really. Though mostly by sight. Our families didn't always get along. But that's neither here nor there. That spring when this Mac character was hired as association rider--"

"Didn't get along?"

I ought to have known better. My interruption sharpened her right up again. "That's another story. There's such a thing as a one-track mind, but honestly, Jick, you McCaskill men sometimes have no-track minds. Now. Do you want to Hear This, Or--"

"You were doing just fine. Real good. Dad got to be the association rider and then what?"

"All right then. He got to be the association rider and--well, he got to paying attention to me. I suppose it could be said I paid some back."

Right then I yearned the impossible. To have watched that double-sided admiration. My mother had turned 19 the last of February (or March 1) of that teaching year; a little older than Alec was now, though not a whole hell of a lot. Given what a good-looker she was even now, she must have been extra special then. And my father the cowboy--hard to imagine that--would have been in his early twenties, a rangy redhead who'd been out in the world all the way to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Varick and Lisabeth, progressing to Mac and Bet~~+~~ and then to some secret territory of

love language that I couldn't even guess at. They are beyond our knowing, those once-young people who become our parents, which to me has always made them that much more fascinating.

--"There was a dance, that spring. In my own schoolhouse, so your father ever since has been telling me I have nobody to blame but myself." She again had a glow to her, as when she'd told me about Pete helloing the horses. "Mac was on hand, by then he'd been hired by the Noon Creek ranchers and was around helping them brand calves and so on. That dance--" she shrugged, as if an impossible question had been asked--"that dance I suppose did it, though neither of us knew it right then. I'd been determined I was never going to marry into a ranch life. Let alone to a cow chouser who didn't own much more than his chaps and hat. And later I found out from your father that he'd vowed never to get interested in a schoolmarm. Too uppity to bother with, he always thought. So much for intentions. Anyway, now here he was, in my own schoolroom. I'd never seen a man take so much pleasure in dancing. Most of it with me, need I say. Oh, and there was this. I hadn't been around him or those other Scotch Heaveners while I was away at college, and I'd lost the knack of listening to that burr of theirs. About the third time that night he said something I couldn't catch, I asked him: 'Do you always talk through your nose?' And then he put on a real burr and said back, 'Lass, it saves wearr and tearrr on my lips. They'rrre in prrrime condition, if you'rrre everrr currrious.'

My father the flirt. Or flirrirt. I must have openly gaped over this, for my mother reddened a bit and stirred in her chair and declared,

"Well, you don't need full details. Now then. Is that enough family history?"

Not really. "You mean, the two of you decided to get married because you liked how Dad danced?"

"You would be surprised how large a part something like that plays. But no, there's more to it than that. Jick, when people fall in love the way we did, it's--I don't mean this like it sounds, but it's like being sick. Sick in a wonderful way, if you can imagine that. The feeling is in you just all the time, is what I mean. It takes you over. No matter what you do, what you try to think about, the other person is there in your head. Or your blood, however you want to say it. It's"--she shrugged at the impossible again--"there's no describing it beyond that. And so we knew. A summer of that--a summer when we didn't even see each other that much, because your father was up in the Two tending the association cattle most of the time--we just knew. That fall, we were married." Here she sprung a slight smile at me. "And I let myself in for all these questions."

There was one, though, that hovered. I was trying to determine whether to open my yap and voice it, when she took it on herself. "My guess is, you're thinking ~~me~~ about Alec and Leona, aren't you."

"Yeah, sort of."

"Lord knows, they imagine they're in a downright epidemic of love," my mother acknowledged. "Alec maybe is. He's always been all go and no whoa. But Leona isn't. She can't be. She's too young and--" my mother scouted for aptness--"flibberty. Leona is in love with the idea of men, not one man. And that's enough on that subject." She looked across at me in a way that made my fingers quit even pretending they were

manufacturing a horsehair hackamore. "Now I have one for you. Jick, you worry me a little."

"Huh? I do?"

"You do. All this interest of yours in the way things were. I just hope you don't go through life paying attention to the past at the expense of the future. That you don't pass up chances because they're new and unexpected." She said this next softly, yet also more strongly than anything else I'd ever heard her say. "Jick, there isn't any law that says a McCaskill can't be as forward-looking as anybody else. Just because your father and your brother, each in his own way, looks to the past to find life, you needn't. They are both good men. I love the two of them--the three of you--in the exact way I told you about, when your father and I started all this. But Jick, be ready for your life ahead. It can't all be read behind you."

I looked back at her. I wouldn't have bet I had it in me to say this. But it did come out: "Mom, I know it all can't. But some?"

#

That next afternoon, Friday, was the homestretch of my digging. It needed to be, with my father due home sometime the next morning. And so once more unto the bowels of the earth, so to speak, taking down with me into the outhouse pit an old short-handled lady shovel Toussaint Rennie had given my father and a bucket to pack the dirt out with.

My mood was first-rate. My mother's discourse from the evening before still occupied my thinking. The other portion of me by now was accustomed to the pit work, muscles making no complaint whatsoever, and

bottoms
in me that feeling of ~~endless~~ stamina you have when you are young, that you can keep laboring on and on and on, forever if need be. The lady shovel I was using was perfect for this finishing-off work of dabbing dirt into the bucket. To make it handy in his ditch-riding, Toussaint always shortened the handle and then ground off about four inches of the shovel blade, cutting it down into a light implement about two-thirds of a normal shovel but which still, he proclaimed, "carries all the dirt I want to." And working as I had been for a while each day without gloves to get some good calluses started, now I had full benefit of the smooth old shovel handle in my bare hands. To me, calluses have always been one of the marks of true summer.

How long I lost myself to the rhythm of the lady shovel and the bucket, I don't know. But definitely I was closing in on the last of my project, bottoming the pit out nice and even, when I stepped toward my ladder to heft up a pailful of dirt and found myself looking into the blaze face of a horse. And above that, a hat and grin which belonged to Alec.

"Going down to visit the Chinamen, huh?"

Why did that get under my skin? I can run that remark of Alec's through my ears a dozen times now and find no particular reason for it to be rilesome. In my brother's lofty position I'd likely have commented something similar. But evidently there is something about being come upon in the bottom of an outhouse hole that will unhinge me, for I snapped right back to Alec:

"Yeah, we can't all spend our time roosting on top of a horse and

looking wise."

Alec let up on his grinning at that. "You're a little bit owly there, Jicker. You maybe got a touch of shovelitis."

I continued to squint up at him and had it framed in my mind to retort "Is that anything like wingwangwoo fever?" when it dawned on me that Alec was paying only about half-attention to our conversation anyway. His gaze was wandering around the station buildings as if he hadn't seen them for a decade or so, yet also as if he wasn't quite seeing them now either. Abstracted, might be the twenty-five cent word for it. A fellow with a lot on his mind, most of it blonde and warm.

One thing did occur to me to find out:

"How much is 19 times 60?"

"1140," replied Alec, still looking absent. "Why?"

"Nothing." Damned if I was going to bat remarks back and forth with somebody whose heart wasn't in it, so I simply asked, "What brings you in off the lone prairie?" I propped an arm against the side of my pit and waited.

Alec finally recalled that I was down there and maybe was owed some explanation for the favor of his presence, so he announced: "I just came by for that town shirt of mine. Need it for rodeo day."

Christamighty. The powers of mothers. Barely a full day had passed since Mom forecast to Pete that it would take the dire necessity of a shirt to draw Alec into our vicinity, and here he was, shirt-chaser incarnate.

It seemed to me too good a topic to let him have for free. "What, are you entering the pretty shirt contest this year?"

Now Alec took a squint down at me from the summit of the horse, as if I only then really registered on him. "No, wisemouth, the calf roping." Hoo-hoo. Here was going to be another Alec maneuver just popular as all hell with our parents, spending money on the entry fee for calf roping.

"I guess that color of shirt does make calves run slower," I deadpanned. The garment in question was dark purplish, about the shade of chokecherry juice. Distinctive, to put it politely. "It's in the bottom drawer there in our--the porch bedroom." Then I figured since I was being helpful anyway, I might as well clarify the terrain for Alec. "Dad's in Missoula. But maybe you'd already heard that, huh?"

But Alec was glancing around in that absent-minded way again, which was nettling me a little more every time he did it. I mean, you don't particularly like to have a person choosing when to phase in and out on you. We had been brothers for about 14 $\frac{5}{6}$ years, so a few seconds of consecutive attention didn't strike me as too awful much to expect of Alec. # Evidently so, though. He had reined his horse's head around to start toward the ~~station~~^{house} before he thought to ask: "How's Mom's mood?"

"Sweet as pie." He might as well know there was an early limit on my aid to this visitation of his. "How's yours?"

I got nothing back from that. Alec simply passed from sight, his horse's tail giving a last little waft as if wiping clean the field of

vision which the pit framed over me.

As I was reaching down to resume with my bucket of earth, though, I heard the hooves stop and the saddle creak.

"Jicker?" Alec's voice came.

"Yeah?"

"I hear you been running the mountains with Stanley Meixell."

While I knew you couldn't have a noseblood in the English Creek valley without everybody offering you a hanky for a week afterward, it had never occurred to me that I too was automatically part of this public pageant. I was so surprised by Alec knowing of my Stanley sojourn that I could only send forth another "Yeah?"

"You want to be a little more choosy about your company, is all."

"Why?" I asked earnestly of the gape of the pit over me. Two days ago I was hiding out from Stanley in this very hole like a bashful badger, and now I sounded like he was my patron saint. "What the hell have you got against Stanley?"

No answer floated down, and it began to seem to me that this brother of mine was getting awful damn cowboyish indeed if he looked down on a person for tending sheep camp. I opened my mouth to tell him something along that line, but what leaped out instead was: "Why's Stanley got everybody in this damn family so spooked?"

Still nothing from above, until I heard the saddle leather and hooves again, moving off toward the ranger station.

The peace of the pit was gone. Echoes of my questions to Alec

drove it out. In its stead came a frame of mind that I was penned down here, seven feet below the world in a future outhouse site, while two members of this damn McCaskill family were resting their bones inside the ~~ranger station~~^{house} and the other one was gallivanting off in Missoula. To each his own and all that, but this situation had gotten considerably out of proportion.

The more I steamed, the more a dipper of water and a handful of gingersnaps seemed necessary to damper me down. And so I climbed out with the bucket of dirt, flung it on the pile as if burying something smelly, and headed into the house.

"Your mind is still set," my mother was saying as I came through the doorway, into the kitchen.

"Still is," agreed Alec, but warily. Neither of them paid me any particular attention as I dipped a drink from the water bucket. That told me plenty about how hot and heavy the conversation was in here.

"A year, Alec." So she was tackling him along that angle again. Delay and live to fight again another day. "Try college for a year and decide then. Right now you and Leona think the world begins and ends in each other. But it's too soon to say, after just these few months."

"It's long enough."

"That's what Earl Zane likely thought, the day before Leona dropped him for you." That seemed to me to credit Earl Zane with more thought capacity than he'd ever shown. Earl was a year or so older than Alec, and his brother Arlee was a year ahead of me in school, and so far as

I could see the Zane boys were living verifications that the human head is mostly bone.

"That's past history," Alec was maintaining.

I punctuated that for him by popping the lid off the Karo can the gingersnaps were kept in. Then there was the sort of scrabbling sound as I dug out a handful. And after that the little sharp crunch as I took a first bite. All of which Alec waited out with the too-patient annoyance of somebody held up while a train goes by. Then declared: "Leona and I ain't--aren't skim-milk kids. We know what we're doing."

My mother took a breath which probably used up half the air in the kitchen. "Alec. What you're doing is rushing into trouble. You can't get ahead on ranch wages. And just because Leona is horse-happy at the moment doesn't mean she's going to stay content with a ranch hand for a husband."

"We'll get by. Besides, Wendell says he'll boost my wages after we're married."

This stopped even my mother, though not for long. "Wendell Williamson," she said levelly, "has nobody's interest at heart but his own. Alec, you know as well as anybody the Double W has been the ruin of that Noon Creek country. Any cattle ranch he hasn't bought outright, he has sewed up with a lease from the bank--"

"If Wendell hadn't got them, somebody else would have," Alec recited.

"Yes," my mother surprised him, "maybe somebody like you. Somebody who doesn't already have more money than he can count. Somebody

who'd run one of those ranches properly, instead of gobbling it up just for the sake of having it. Alec, Wendell Williamson is using you the way he uses a handkerchief to blow his nose. Once he's gotten a few years of work out of you"--another kitchen-clearing breath here--"and evidently gotten you married off to Leona, so you'll have that obligation to carry around in life, too--once he's made enough use of you and you start thinking in terms of a real raise in wages, down the road you'll go and he'll hire some other youngster--"

"Youngster? Now wait one damn min--"

"--with his head full of cowboy notions. Alec, staying on at the Double W is a dead end in life."

While Alec was bringing up his forces against all this, I crunched into another ginger snap.

My brother and my mother sent me looks from their opposite sides of the room, a convergence about as taut as being roped with two lassoes simultaneously. She suggested: "Aren't you supposed to be shoveling instead of demolishing cookies?"

"I guess. See you around, Alec."

"Yeah. Around."

Supper that night was about as lively as dancing to a dead march.

Alec had ridden off toward town--Leona-ward--evidently altered not one whit from when he arrived, except for gaining himself the rodeo shirt. My mother was working out her mood on the cooking utensils. I was a little surprised the food didn't look pulverized

when it arrived to the table. So far as I could see, I was the only person on the place who'd made any true progress that day, finishing the outhouse hole. When I came in to wash up I considered announcing cheerfully "Open for business out there," but took a look at my mother's stance there at the stove and decided against.

the two of us
So ~~we~~ just ate, which if you're going to be silent is probably the best thing to be doing anyway. I was doubly glad I had coaxed as much conversation out of her last night as I had. I sometimes wonder if life is anything but an averaging out. One kind of day and then its opposite.

Likely, though, the mother of Alec McCaskill would not have agreed just then that life has its own simple average. For by the time my mother washed the supper dishes and I was drying them, I began to realize she wasn't merely in a maternal snit. She was thinking hard about something. And if I may give myself credit, it occurred to me that her thinking deserved my absence. Any new idea anybody in the McCaskill family could come up with deserved all encouragement.

"Need me any more?" I asked as I hung the dish towel. "I thought I might ride up to check on Walter's and fish my way home till toward dark." The year's longest day was just past, twilight would go on for a couple or three hours yet.

"No. No, go ahead." Her cook's instinct roused her to add: "Your father will be home tomorrow, so catch us a big mess." In those times a person could, ~~The~~ limit was 25 fish a day.

And then she was back into the thinking.

Nothing was amiss at Walter Kyle's place. As I closed the door

*my mother's
Alec*

on that tidy sparse room, I wondered if Walter didn't have the right idea. Live alone and let everybody else knock bruises on one another.

The fishing was as close to a cinch as fishing can ever be. Since I was using an honest-to-God pole and reel and it was a feeding time of evening, the trout in those North Fork beaver dams all but volunteered. Do I even need to say out loud that I limited? One more time I didn't owe my father a theoretical milkshake, and there still was evening left when the gill of that ~~fifteenth~~^{twenty-fifth} trout was threaded onto my willow ~~fish hanger~~^{stringer} and I went to collect Pony from the tall meadow grass where she was grazing.

My mother still was in her big think when I came back into the ranger station toward the last of dusk. I reported that the mess of cleaned fish were in a pan of water in the spring house, then stretched myself in an obvious sort of way, kissed her goodnight, and headed for the north porch and my bed. I honestly didn't want to be around any more heavy cogitation that day.

That north porch, a screened-in affair, had been built to take advantage of the summer shade on that side of the English Creek ~~station~~^{ranger house,} but in late spring Alec and I always moved out there to use it as our bedroom. Now that he was bunking at the Double W I of course had the room to myself, and I have to testify here that gaining a private bedroom goes far toward alleviating the absence of a brother.

Not just the privacy did I treasure, though. It seemed to me at the time, and still does, that a person could not ask for a better site than that one for day's end. That north porch made a sort of copperwire

bubble into the night world. Moths would bat and bat against the screening, especially if I'd brought a coal oil lamp out with me. Mosquitoes, in the couple of weeks in early June when they are fiercest, would alight out there and try to needle their way in, and there's a real reward to lying there knowing that those little whining bastards can't get at you. Occasional scutterings and whishes in the grass brought news of an owl or skunk working on the field mouse population, out there beyond the lampshine. Many an evening, though, I would not even light the lamp, just use the moon when I went out to bed. Any bright night filled the width of that porch with the shaggy wall of English Creek's cottonwoods and aspens, and atop them like a ^{parapet} ~~walkway~~ the ^{eluent block} ~~flat~~ line of the benchland on the other side of the water. Out the west end of the porch, a ^{swatch} ~~patch~~ of the mountains stood: Roman Reef, and Billygoat and Phantom Woman Peaks ^{behind} ~~on top~~ of it. With Alec's cot folded away I had room to move mine longways into the east end of the room, so that I could lie looking at the mountains, and enjoy the bonus too that, with my head there below the east sill, the sunrise would overshoot me instead of beaming into my face.

I recall that this was a lampless night, that I was flopping into bed without even any thought of reading for awhile, more tired from the day than I'd realized, when I heard my mother at the phone.

"Max? I'll do it. I still think your common sense has dried up and blown away. But I'll Do It." And whanged down the receiver as if her words might sneak back out of the telephone wire.

What that was about, I had no clue. Max? The only Max I could

conjure up was Max Devlin, the assistant supervisor at the national forest office down in Great Falls, and why she would be calling him up this time of night just to doubt his common sense, I couldn't figure. But maybe the go-round with Alec had put her into her mood to deliver the Forest Service a little of what she considered it generally deserved. I definitely was not going back out there to inquire. Sleep was safer.

My father arrived back from Missoula full of sass and vinegar. He always came away from a Region Headquarters session avid to get back to the real planet again.

Even the fact that it was Saturday and he had a blank week of ~~diary~~ ~~book~~ entries to catch up on didn't dent his spirits. "Easy enough after one of these Mazoola schools. Let's see--Monday: snored. Tuesday, tossed and turned. Wednesday, another restless day of sleep--"

As for my handiwork out back, he was duly impressed. "The entire Fort Peck ^{dam} crew couldn't have dug better."

What ought I to tell about the days between then and the Fourth of July? The outhouse got moved in good order, fitting over my pit like a hen onto a fresh nest, and I put in another shovel day of tossing the dirt into the old hole. My father combed the Two up, down, and sideways, checking on the fire lookouts and patrolling the allotments to see how the range was looking and siccing Paul Eliason and the CCC crews onto trail and road work and any other improvements that could be thought up. Shearing time came and went; I helped wrangle Dode Withrow's sheep in the pens the shearers set up at the foot of the South Fork trail to

handle the Withrow and Hahn and Kyle bands, then Pete came and took me up to the Blackfeet Reservation for a couple more days' wrangling when his were sheared out there on the open prairie north of the Two Medicine River. Nothing more was seen of Alec at English Creek. My mother no doubt posted my father about the going-over she had given Alec when he came by for the shirt, although a reaming like that has to be seen and heard to be entirely appreciated.

*we sheared
our land
late June
start of July*

Beyond that, I suppose the main news by the morning of the Fourth when the three of us began to ready to go to town for the holiday was that we were going. For my father didn't always get the Fourth of July off; it depended on fire danger in the forest. I in fact was getting a little nervous about this year. The cool summer turned itself around on the last day of June. Hot and sticky. Down in Great Falls they had first a dust storm--people trying to drive in from Helena reported hundreds of tumbleweeds rolling across the highway on Gore Hill--and after that, about fifteen minutes of thunderstorm with rain coming down as if from faucets. But then, the Falls receives a lot of bastardly weather we don't; particularly in summer, its site out there on the plains gives storms a chance to build and build before they strike the city. The mountain weather was our concern, and so much of May and June had been cool and damp that even this hot start of July wasn't really ~~threatening the Two yet.~~ ^{a threat, yet.} Final persuasion came from the holiday itself. That fourth morning arrived as a good moderate one, promising a day warm enough to be comfortable but nowhere near sweltering, and my father said his decision ^{as we sat down to} ~~at~~ breakfast. It came complete with a sizable

grin, and the words of it were: "Watch out, Gros Ventre. Here we come."

I had a particular stake in a trouble-free Fourth and parental good humor. By dint of recent clean living and some careful asking, and I suppose the example of son-in-rebellion provided to my parents by Alec, I had won permission to make a separate horseback sojourn into town in order to stay overnight with my best friend from school, Ray Heaney.

As I cagily pointed out, "Then the morning after the Fourth, I can just ride back out here and save you a trip into town to get me."

"Strange I didn't see the logic of all this before," commented my mother. "You'll be saving us a trip we wouldn't have to make if you didn't stay in there in the first place, am I right?" But it turned out that was just her keeping in practice.

Of course, receiving permission from your parents is not the same as being able to hang onto it, and I was stepping pretty lightly that morning to keep from inspiring any second thoughts on their part. In particular, as much as possible I was avoiding the kitchen and my mother's culinary orbit. Which was sound Fourth of July policy in any case. A reasoning person would have thought she was getting ready to lay siege to Gros Ventre, instead of only going in there on a picnic.

My father ventured through for a cup of coffee and I overheard my mother say "Why I said I'd do this I'll never know" and him respond "Uh huh, you're certainly downright famous for bashfulness" and then her response in turn, but with a little laugh, "And you're notorious for sympathy."

As I was trying to dope that out--my mother bashful about a creek picnic?--my father poked his head into where I was and asked: "How about tracking down the ice creamer and putting it in the pickup?"

I did so, meanwhile trying to ^{calculate} ~~dope out~~ how soon I could decently propose that I start my ride to town. I didn't want to seem antsy about it, on the other hand I sure desired to get the Fourth of July underway.

But here came my father out and over to me at the pickup. Then commemorated himself with me forever by saying, "Here. Better carry some weight in your pocket so you don't blow away." With which, I was handed a half dollar.

I must have looked my startlement. Other Fourth of Julys, if there was any spending money bestowed on Alec and me it was more on the order of 10¢. If there was any.

"Call it shovel wages." My father stuck his hands in his hip pockets and studied the road to town as if he'd never noticed it before. "You might as well head on in. We'll see you there at the park." Then, as if in afterthought: "Why don't you ride Mouse, he can stand the exercise."

When you are fourteen you take a step up in life whenever you can find it and meanwhile try to keep a mien somewhere between At last! and Do you really mean that? I stayed adult and stately until I was behind the barn and into the horse pasture, then gave in to a grin the dimension of a jack-o-lantern's. A by God full-scale horse, mine for the holiday. In the corner of the pasture where Pony was grazing she lifted her head to watch me but I called out, "Forget it, midget," and went on over and bridled Mouse.

Biggie

—

1

Mouse and I scooted right along that road toward Gros Ventre. He was a fast walker, besides elevating me and my spirits more than I'd been used to on Pony. The morning--mid-morning and past, by now--was full of sun, but enough breeze was following along English Creek for a person to ride in pure comfort. The country still looked just glorious. All the valley of English Creek was fresh with hay. Nobody was mowing quite yet, except for the one damp green swath around Ed Van Bebber's lower field where he had tried it a week too early as he did every year.

~~In most ways, then,~~ [#] I was more than ready for the Fourth. A lot seemed to have happened since that evening back at the start of June when I looked up and saw Alec and Leona parading down the rise to join us for a family supper. One whole hell of a lot. No longer was I even sure that we four McCaskills quite were a family. It was time we all had something else on our minds, besides ruckus. Alec plainly already did, the way he intended to trig up on behalf of Leona and a calf. And given how my mother was whaling into the picnic preparation and my father was grinning like a Chessy cat about getting the day off from rangering and I was strutting atop this tall horse with coinage heavy in my pocket, the Fourth was promising to ^{do} the job for the other three of us, as well.

It is no new thought to say that life goes on. Yet that's where it does go.

—

*Alec on
sidekick
1900*

In maybe an hour and a half, better time than I would have thought possible for that ride in from the English Creek station, Mouse and I were topping the little rise near the turnoff to Charlie Finletter's place, the last ranch before town.

From there a mile or so outside, Gros Ventre looked like a green cloudbank--cottonwood trees billowing so thick that it took some inspection to find traces of houses among them. Gros Ventre's neighborhoods were planted double with cottonwoods, a line of trees along the front yards and another between sidewalk and street. Then the same colonnade again on the other side of the street. All of this of course had been *done* fifty or more years before, a period of time that grows you a hell of a big



3

cottonwood. Together with the original groves that already rose
old and tall along English

Creek before Gros Ventre was ever thought of, the streetside plantation produced almost a roof over the town. This cottonwood canopy was particularly wonderful just before a rain, when the leaves began to shiver, rattle in their papery way. The whole town seemed to tingle then, and the sound picked up when a gust of wind from the west ushered in the rain, and next the air was filled with the seethe of water onto all that foliage. In Gros Ventre, even a dust-settler sounded like a real weather event.

The English Creek road entered town past the high school--one of those tan-brick two-story crates that seemed to be the only way they knew how to build high schools in those days--and I nudged Mouse into an even quicker pace so as not to dwell on that topic any longer than necessary. We were aiming ourselves across town, to the northeast end where the Heaneys' house stood.

Mouse and I met Main Street at the bank corner, alongside the First National, and here I can't help but pause for a look around Gros Ventre of that Fourth of July day, just as I did then before reining Mouse north along the street.

Helwig's grocery and merc, with its old-style wooden square front and the Eddy's bread sign in its window.

The Toggery clothing store, terra cotta along its top like cake frosting.

Musgrave's
~~Musgrave's~~ drugstore, with the mirror behind the soda fountain so
 that a person could sit there over a ~~soda~~ ^{milkshake} assuming a person had the
 price of a ~~soda~~ ^{milkshake}, not always the case in those times and keep track of
 the town traffic.

Grady Tilton's garage.

Dale Quint's saddlery and leather repair shop. Maybe a decent
 description of Gros Ventre of that time was that it still had a leather
 man but not yet a dentist. (A person went to Conrad for tooth work.)

Saloons, the Pastime and Spenger's, (although Dolph Spenger was a
 dozen or more years dead.)

The Odeon movie theatre, the one place in town with its name in neon
 script. The other modern touch lent by the Odeon was its recent policy
 of showing the movie twice on Saturday night ~~first~~ first at 7:30, then the
 "owl show" at 9.

The post office, the ^{only} one new building in Gros Ventre since I was old enough to remember. A New Deal project, this had been, complete with a mural of the Lewis and Clark expedition portaging around the Great Falls of the Missouri River in 1805. Lewis and Clark maybe were not news to postal customers of the Two country, but York, Lewis's Negro slave standing out amid the portagers like a black panther in a snowfield, definitely was.

The little stucco-sided Carnegie library, of a shape and style that always reminded me of a fancy caboose.

The Lunchery, run by Mae Sennett. The occasional times when I would be with my father when he was on Forest Service meal money, the Lunchery was our place and oyster stew our order. It of course came from a can, but I

see that deep bowl yet, the milk yellowing from the blob of butter melting in the middle of it, and if Mae Sennett was doing the serving herself she always warned "Watch out for any oysterberries," by which she meant those tiny pearls that sometimes show up.

^{most} I have to say, I still am not truly comfortable eating in any ~~restaurant~~ ^{establishment} that doesn't have that tired ivory look to its walls that the Lunchery did. A proof that the place has been in business longer than overnight and at least has sold decent enough food that people keep coming back.