

Doc Spence's office. Across the empty lot from Doc's, the office of the lawyer, Eli Kinder. Who, strange to say, was a regular figure in the sheep traffic through this street, when the bands flowed through town on their way to ^{the} summer grass ^{of} the Blackfeet Reservation. Eli was a before-dawn riser and often would arrive downtown just as a band of sheep did. It was odd to see him, in his suit and tie, helping shove those woolies along Main Street, but Eli had been raised on a ranch down in the Highwood Mountains and knew what he was doing.

The sidestreet businesses, Tracy's creamery and Ed Heaney's lumber yard ^{and hardware} and Adam Kerz's coal and trucking enterprise.

The set of bank buildings, marking what might be called the down of downtown: the First National Bank of Gros Ventre in tan brick, and ^{east corner} ~~east corner~~ from it the red brick of what had been the English Creek Valley Stockmen's Bank. The Valley Stockmen's went under in the early 1920s when half of all the banks in Montana failed, and the site now was inhabited, if not exactly occupied, by Sandy Stott's one-chair barber shop. The style in banks in those times was to have a fancy doorway set into the corner nearest the street intersection--Gros Ventre's pair of bank buildings stared down each other's throats in exactly this fashion--and when Sandy took over the Valley Stockmen's building he simply painted barber-pole stripes on one of the fat granite pillars supporting the doorway.

What have I missed? Of course; also there on the Valley Stockmen's block, the newspaper office with its name proclaiming on a plate-glass window in the same typeface as its masthead: Cleaner. Next to that a more recent enterprise, Pauline Shaw's Moderne Beauty Shoppe. The story

was that when Bill Reinking first saw his new neighboring sign, he stuck his head in the shop to ask Pauline if she was sure she hadn't left an "e" off Beauty.

I heard somebody say once that the business section of every Western town he'd ever seen looked as if it originated by falling out the back end of a truck. Not so with Gros Ventre.

During those Depression years Gros Ventre ^{did} look roadworn. Weathered by all it had been through. But to me the town also held a sense of being what it ought to be. Of aptness, ~~it~~ maybe is the term. Not fancy, not shabby. Steady.

~~of wares.~~ Settlement here dated back to when some weary freight wagoner pulled in for the night at the nice creekside sheltered by cottonwoods. As the freighters' trail between Fort Shaw on the Sun River and southern Alberta developed, this site became a regular waystop, nicknamed The Middle since it was about midway between Fort Shaw and Canada. ~~Although~~ Although some of us also suspect that to those early-day wagoners the place seemed like the middle of nowhere. *Gros Ventre grew to about a thousand*

people when the homesteaders began arriving to Montana in droves in the first decade of this century--my mother could remember in her childhood coming to town and seeing wagon after wagon of immigrants heading out onto the prairie, a white rag tied on one spoke of a wagonwheel so the revolutions could be counted to measure the bounds of the claimed land-- and that population total never afterward varied more than a hundred either way. Nor varied much in quality either, I think it can be said. Gros Ventre simply tended to draw people who were there from choice rather than merely lack of imagination. Settlers from Scotch Heaven or

"Looks like it could kind of use a prop, all right," Stanley observed to a bib-overalled idler leaning against one of the porch posts. Who turned out to be the exact wrong person to make that joke to: C.E. Sedgwick himself.

"If my enterprise don't suit you," Sedge huffed, "you can always bunk down there in the diamond willows," indicating the brush at the bend of English Creek.

"How about," Stanley offered, "me being a little more careful with my mouth, and you giving me a second chance as a customer?"

Sedge hung his thumbs into his bib straps and considered. Then decided: "Go ~~entirely~~ mute and I might adopt you into the family. Bring your gear on in."

The Northern burned in the dry summer of 1910. Although, according to old-timers, "burned" doesn't begin to say it. Incinerated, maybe, or conflagrated. For the Northern blaze took the rest of the block with it and threatened that whole end of town; if there had been a whisper of wind, half of Gros Ventre would have become ash and a memory. Sedge being Sedge, people weren't surprised when he decided to rebuild. After all, he went around in those overalls because what he really liked about being a hotelier was the opportunity to be his own maintenance man. But what Sedge erected still sat, this Fourth when I was atop Mouse, across the end of Main Street as a kind of civic astonishment—a three-story fandango in stone, quarried from the gray cliffs near where English Creek joins the Two Medicine River; half a block square, this reborn Sedgwick hostelry, with round towers at each corner and a swooping pointed ornament

in the middle, rather like the spike on those German soldiers' helmets. Even yet, strangers who don't know that the Pondera county courthouse is twenty-two miles east in Conrad assume that Sedge's hotel is it. Sedge in fact contributed to the civic illusion by this time not daubing a sign all across the front of the place. Instead, only an inset of chiseled letters rainbowing over the entranceway:

I C K
 W H
 G O
 D U
 E S
 S E

Sedge sold out in 1928, to a family from Seattle who seemed to somehow eke a living out of that big gray elephant of a hotel even after hard times hit. ~~(Even during the Depression, whatever travelers there were had to sleep someplace, I suppose.)~~ About 1931 Sedge died of pleurisy, and almost as if she'd been waiting just offstage, his widow emerged as ^{one of} ~~probably~~ Gros Ventre's most well-to-do citizen~~s~~ and certainly its looniest. Lila Sedgwick was a tall, bony woman. Her build always reminded me of Abraham Lincoln. Almost any day she could be seen downtown three or four times, some days six or eight, for she no sooner would get home than she would forget about having just gone for the mail or on some other errand and would go for it again. In her long old-style dresses and with those Lincoln arms and elbows

11

poking out she inevitably was a figure of fun, although the one and only time I said something smart about her my mother's frown closed ~~me~~ down in a hurry.

"Lila Sedge is not to be laughed at," she said, not in her whetstoned voice but just sort of instructively. "The clouds have settled on her mind."

I don't know where my mother got that, but always after when I would see Lila Sedge, creeping along this street for the third time in an hour or gandering up at a cottonwood tree as if she's never encountered one before, I would wonder about how it was to have a clouded mind. Somewhere in there, I supposed, a bruise-colored thunderhead that was Sedge's death. Maybe mare's tails high away in the past where she was a girl. Fluffs which carried faces--aunts, uncles, schoolmates, any of us she happened to meet on the street--in and out of her recognition. Until my mother's words about Lila Sedge I had never thought of ^{the} weather of the brain, but more and more I have come to believe in it.

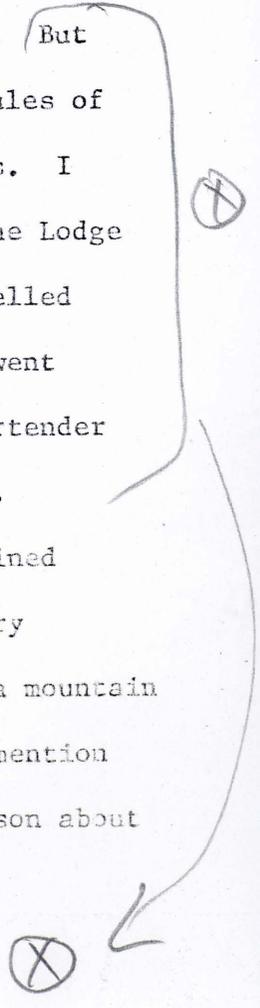
But enough on that. The Sedgwicks and their namesake hotel provided Gros Ventre its one titanic building and its roving human landmark. The ~~pair of enterprises~~ ~~side by side~~ south across the street from the Sedgwick House ministered to the town internally.

~~The fact that the Lunchery and the Medicine Lodge saloon, shouldered side by side~~ ^{gave} Gros Ventre its "rough" section of town in the thriftiest manner possible. I would calculate that in Great Falls it took about four blocks of First Avenue South to add up into a neighborhood

of similar local notoriety. Actually, as with any pleasure emporium the wickedest thing about the Medicine Lodge was its reputation. ~~The leading Medicine Lodge story was of an innocent visitor reacting in alarm when the bartender, tall Tom Harry, leaned toward him and rumbled: "Shoot you one?" All that was being asked, though, was whether the customer, wanted a glass of beer drawn from the tap.~~

The Medicine Lodge had waited out Prohibition behind boarded windows, but Tom Harry more than brought it back to light and life. Also, maybe after those dry years the town was thirsty for a saloon with a bit of flair. ^{Tom Harry} He had come over from running a bar, and some said a taxi dance joint as well, at the Fort Peck dam project. Supposedly all he brought with him was a wad of cash and the picture of Franklin Delano Roosevelt which had adorned the wall of his Fort Peck enterprise. (But also, as it proved out, along with him came a set of invisible rules of saloon behavior, which every so often somebody would stray across. I think of the night when my father and I were entering the Medicine Lodge and met a stranger with a cigar in his mouth being forcibly propelled into the street. It turned out that although Tom Harry himself went around under a blue cigarette haze--tailormades; no Fort Peck bartender ever had time to roll his own--he would not tolerate cigar smoke.

Be that as it may, in the Medicine Lodge FDR was promptly joined on the wall by a minor menagerie of stuffed animal heads Tom Harry acquired from somewhere. Several buck deer and an antelope and a mountain sheep and a bobcat snarling about the company he was in; not to mention the six-point elk head which set off arguments every hunting season about how much his absent body would weigh.



In itself, this taxidermy herd populated the Medicine Lodge considerably. But the place also held a constant legion of the living, more or less. These setters, as my father called the six or eight guys who sat around in there--he was not above stepping in for a beer after our Lunchery meal, and if nobody official-looking was on hand Tom Harry didn't seem to mind my being with him--the setters always occupied the stools at the far end of the bar, and anybody who entered got long gazes from them as if they were cataloguing the human race.

Decapitated animals and owlish geezers do not, I realize, sound like much of a decor. And yet the Medicine Lodge did three times as much business as Spenger's or the Pastime, both much more "respectable" places back downtown. I suppose it is and ever will be the habit of the race: people gravitate to a certain place to do their drinking and logic will never veer them. At least one night a week in the Medicine Lodge, gravitation amounted to something more like an avalanche. ~~Every~~ Saturday night, thirsts converged from everywhere in the Two country. Hay hands who had come in for a bath and haircut at Shorty Stott's but decided instead to wash down the inside of themselves. ~~Entire~~ shearing crews one time of year, lamb lickers (as guys who worked in lambing sheds were known) another. Any season, a shepherd from the mountains or the Reservation to inaugurate a two-week spree. ~~(Not least among the reasons that those bands of sheep were trailed through town at dawn was that the Medicine Lodge wasn't yet open to waylay herders.)~~ Government men from reclamation projects. ^{Likely} ~~Maybe~~ a few Double W cowpokes. Definitely the customary setters, who had been building up the calluses on their elbows all week just for this. Always a sufficient cast of characters for loud dialogues, occasional shoving matches, and eventual passing-outs. Maybe you couldn't get away with cigar smoke in the Medicine Lodge, but you could with what counted.

Turning east past the Sedgwick House and the Medicine Lodge, Mouse and I now were into the Heaneys' side of town. An early priest had persuaded the Catholic landowner who platted this particular neighborhood to name the streets after the first missions in Montana, which in turn bore the names of saints. This created what the current Gros Ventre postmaster, Chick Jennings, called "the repeater part of town," with mailing addresses such as St. Mary St., St. Peter St. and St. Ignatius St. It was ^{at} the end of St. Ignatius St. that the Heaney house stood, a white two-story one with sills of robin's-egg blue. Ed Heaney owned the lumber yard, and so was the one person ^{in those Depression years} in town with some access to paint. The robin's egg blue had been a shipping mistake by the manufacturer--it is a shade pretty delicate to put up against the weather of Montana--and Ed lugged the can home and made the best of it.

The place looked empty as I rode up, which was as I expected. Rather than the creek picnic, the Heaneys always went out to a family shindig at Genevieve's parents' farm, quite a ways east of Gros Ventre on the Conrad road. So with Ray out there, I wouldn't link up with him until the rodeo, and I simply slung my warbag inside the Heaneys' back porch and got back on Mouse again, *and went picnicking.*

———
Cars and pickups and trucks were parked so thick that they all but swamped the part of town around the park. It is nice about a horse, that you can park him handily while Henry Ford still would be circling the block and cussing. I chose a stand of high grass between the creek bank and the big cottonwoods just west of the park and

pastured Mouse on a tie of rope short enough that he couldn't tangle it around anything and long enough for him to graze a little. Then gave him a final proud pat, and headed off to enlist with the picnickers.

Some writer or another put down that in the history of Montana, the only definite example of civic uplift was when the Virginia City vigilantes hung the Henry Plummer gang in 1864. I think that overstates, a bit. You can arrive into the most scruffy of Montana towns and delve around a few minutes and in all likelihood find ~~two out-~~

Mahmet Roeder, 61-64

a public park of some sort.

mod

In Gros Ventre's instance, the park was a half-circle of maybe an acre, fronting on English

Creek just west of Main Street and the highway bridge, one last oasis before the road arrowed north into the plains and benchlands. In recent years WPA crews had made it a lot more of a park than it had been, clearing out the willows which were taking over the creek bank and then laying in some riprap to keep the spring runoff out. And someone during that WPA work came up with an idea I've not seen before or since. There near the creek where a big crippled cottonwood leaned--a windstorm had ripped off its main branches--a crew sawed the tree off low to the ground, leaving a broad stump about two feet high; then atop the stump was built a speaker's pulpit, a slatted round affair somewhat on the order of a ship's crow's-nest. The one and only time I saw Senator Burton K. Wheeler, who some people thought might become President if Roosevelt ever stopped being, we were let out of school to hear him give a speech from this speaking stump.

From where I had left Mouse I emerged into the creekside corner of the park where the stump pulpit stood, and I stopped beside it to have a look around.

A true Two country Fourth of July. The trees were snowing.

Fat old cottonwoods stood all along the arc between the park and the neighborhood, while younger trees were spotted here and there

} Choteau
4th of July '81
card in picnic
file

across the rest of the expanse, as if they had been sent out to be shadebearers. The day was providing just enough breeze into the treetops to rattle them a little and make them shed their cotton wisps out through the air like slow snow.

Through the cottonfall, the spike of tower atop the Sedgwick House stuck up above one ~~big~~ cottonwood among the trees at the far side of the park. As if that tree had on a party hat.

As for people, the park this day was a bunch of islands of them. I literally mean islands. The summer thus far had stayed cool enough that even a just-warm day like this one seemed so unaccustomed that it was putting people into the shade of the various cottonwoods, each gathering of family and friends on their specific piece of dappled shade like those cartoons of castaways on a desert isle with a single palm tree.

I had to traipse around somewhat, helloing people and being helloed, before I spotted my mother and my father, sharing shade and a spread blanket with Pete and Marie Reese and Toussaint Rennie near the back of the park.

Among the greetings, my father's predominated: "Thank goodness you're here. Pete's been looking for somebody to challenge to an ice-cream making contest." So before I even got sat down, I was off on that tangent. "Come on, Jick," Pete said as he reached for their ice cream freezer and I picked up ours, "anybody who cranks gets a double dish."

We took our freezers over near the coffee-and-lemonade table

70Yrs a
Cowboy -
men twisting
ice cream paper
handles before
lunch -
card in picnic file

where everybody else's was. This year, I should explain, was the turn of English Creek and Noon Creek to provide the picnic with ice cream and beverage. Bill Reinking, who despite being a newspaperman had some fairly practical ideas, was the one to suggest the systems; that instead of everybody and his brother showing up at the Fourth armed with ice creamers and coffee pots and jugs of lemonade, each part of the community take a turn in providing for all. Now one year the families west of Main Street in Gros Ventre did the ice-cream-coffee-and-ade, the next year the families east of Main Street, the one after that those of us from English Creek and Noon Creek, and then after us what was called "the rest of Creation," the farm families from east and south and north of town and anybody else who didn't fit some other category.

So for the next while Pete and I took turns with the other ice cream manufacturers, cranking and cranking. Lots of elbow grease, and jokes about where all that fancy wrist work had been learned. Marie shortly came over on coffee duty--she was going to do the making, my mother would serve after everybody'd eaten--and brought along a message from my father and Toussaint: "They say, a little faster if you can stand it." Pete doffed his Stetson to them in mock gratitude. The holiday definitely was tuning up. And even yet I can think of no better way to begin a Fourth of July than there among virtually all of our English Creek neighbors. Not Walter Kyle, up on the mountain with his sheep; and not the Hebners, who never showed themselves at these creek picnics; and not the Withrows, who must have been delayed some way. But everybody else. The South Fork folks other than the Withrows--Fritz and Greta Hahn, Ed and Alice Van Bebber. Then the

Pondera News,
County
→ 2 Juns 139-
card in
picnic file -
"coffee, lemonade
& ice cream
will be provided"

} lemonade:
Joy Hamlett

population of the main creek, those who merely migrated downstream here to the park, so to speak. Preston and Peg Rozier. Charlie and Dora Finletter. Ken and Janet Busby, and Bob and Arleta Busby-- I had half-wondered whether Stanley Meixell might show up with the Busbys, and was relieved that he hadn't. Don and Charity Frew. The Hills arrived last, while I was still inventorying the crowd; J.L. leaning shakily on his wife Nan. "Set her down, J.L.," somebody called, referring to the ice creamer the Hills had brought with them, "we'll do the twirling." "I get to shivering much more than this," J.L. responded, "and I can just hold the goddamn thing in my hands and make ice cream." In truth, J.L.'s tremble was constant and almost ague-like by now. It is terrible to see, an ailment fastened onto a person and riding him day and night. I hope not to end up that way, life over and done with before existence is.

But that was not the thought for this day. If a sense of life, of the blood racing beneath your skin, is not with you at a Fourth of July creek picnic, then it is never going to be.

When Pete and I finished ice cream duty and returned to the blanket, my father had Toussaint on the topic of what the Fourth of July was like when Gros Ventre and he were young.

"Phony Nose Gorman," Toussaint was telling. "Is he one you remember?"

My father shook his head: "Before my time." Much of Toussaint's lore was before anyone's time.

"Tim Gorman," Toussaint elaborated, "Cox and Floweree's foreman a while. Down on Sun River. Froze his nose in that '86 winter. Some doctor at Fort Shaw fixed him up. Grafted skin on. I saw him after, the surgery was good. But Phony Nose Gorman he was called. He was the one the flagpole broke with. There across from ^{the} Medicine Lodge, where the garage is now. He was climbing it to put Deaf Smith Mitchell's hat on top. On a bet. Those times, they bet on the sun coming up--"

Toussaint Rennie this day looked maybe sixty-five years old, yet had to be ^{at least a dozen} ~~possibly fifteen~~ beyond that. He was one of those chuckling men you meet rarely, able to stave off time by perpetually staying in such high humor that the years didn't want to interrupt him. From that little current of laugh always purling in him Toussaint's face had crinkled everywhere it could. Tan and wrinkled deep, that face, like a gigantic walnut. The rest of Toussaint was the general build of a potbelly stove. I suppose his girth had been increasing steadily for some while without our really noticing, for he hadn't yet let it interrupt life. He still was riding the ditches of the Blackfeet Reservation's Two Medicine irrigation project, his short-handled shovel sticking out of a rifle scabbard as his horse plodded the canal banks. Allotting a foot-and-a-half head of water to each farm ditch; plugging gopher holes or muskrat tunnels in the canal bank with gunny sacks of dirt; keeping culverts from clogging; in a land of scarce water a ditch rider's job was vital above most others, and Toussaint apparently

was going to hold his until death made it drop from his hand.

In about the way that shovel was carried in that scabbard, the history of the Two country rested there in Toussaint's memory, handy to employ. And sharpened by steady use. It never was clear to me how Toussaint, isolated way to hell and gone--he bached out there a few miles west of where the highway crossed the Two Medicine River, about 15 miles from Browning and a good 30 from Gros Ventre--could know news from anywhere in the Two country as fast as it happened. Whatever the network was--my father called it moccasin telegraph--Toussaint was its most durable conductor. He came to the Two in the time of the buffalo, a boy eight or so years old when his family roved in from somewhere in the Dakotas. The Rennies were part French--my father thought they might have started off as Reynauds--but mostly tribal haze. Of their Indian background, Toussaint himself was only ever definite in declaring himself not a Blackfeet, which had to do with the point that the Two Medicine woman he married, Mary Rides Proud, was one. The usual assumption was that the Rennie lineage was Métis, for other Métis families had ended up in this general region of Montana after the Riel rebellion in ^{Canada} Alberta was put down in 1885. But count back across the decades and you found that Toussaint already had grown to manhood here in the Two country by the time the ^{Canadian} ~~Mounties~~ were hanging Louis Riel and scattering his followers. Toussaint himself was worse than no help on this matter of origin, for all he would say was to claim pedigree from the Lewis and Clark expedition: "I come down from Meriwether Lewis himself. My grandfather had red

} Howard,
Strange
Empire

hair."

Thinking back on it now, I suspect the murk of Toussaint's lineage was carefully maintained. For the one thing unmistakable about the Rennie family line was its knack for ending up on the side of the winners in any given contest of the Montana frontier. "The prairie was so black with buffalo it looked burnt. I was with the Assiniboines, we came down on the buffalo from the Sweetgrass Hills," one Toussaint tale would relate, and the next, "The trader Joe Kipp hired me to take cattle he was selling to the Army at Fort Benton. He knew I kept Indians from stealing them." Able to straddle that way, Toussaint had a view into almost anything that happened in the early Two country. He was with the bull teams that brought the building materials for the original Blackfeet Reservation agency north of Choteau, before there was a Choteau or a Gros Ventre. "Ben Short was the wagon boss. He was a good cusser." After the winter of '86, Toussaint freighted cowhides off the prairie by the thousands. "That was what was left in this country by spring. More cowhides than cows." He saw young Lieutenant John J. Pershing and his Negro soldiers ride through Gros Ventre in 1896, herding a few hundred woebegone Crees north to push them back over the line into Canada. "Each creek those soldiers crossed, English Creek and Birch Creek and Badger Creek and all of them, some more Crees leaked away into the brush." He saw the canals come to the prairie, the eighty-thousand acre irrigation project that built Valier from scratch in 1909 and drew in trainloads of homesteaders. "Pretty

quick they wondered about this country. Dust blew through Valier there, plates were turned face-down on the table until you turned them up to eat off of. One tree, the town had. Mrs. Guardipee watered it from her wash tubs."--and the Two Medicine canal he himself had patrolled for almost a quarter century, the ditch rider job he held and held in spite of being not a Blackfeet: "It stops them being jealous of each other. With me in the job, none of them is." The first blats of sheep into this part of Montana were heard by Toussaint. "I think, 1879. People called Lyons, down on the Teton. Other sheepmen came fast. Charlie Scoffin, Charlie McDonald, Oliver Goldsmith Cooper." The first survey crews, he watched make their sightings. "1902, men with telescopes and Jacob's staffs."

--"The first Fourth of July you ever saw here," my father was prompting. "When was that, do you think?"

Toussaint could date it without thinking. "Custer's year. '76. We heard just before the Fourth. All dead at the Little Bighorn. Everybody. Gros Ventre was just Barclay's hotel and saloon. Men took turns, coming out of the saloon to stand sentry. To look north." Here Toussaint leaned toward Pete's wife Marie and said in mock reproach: "For Blackfeet."

All of us echoed his chuckle. The tease to Marie was a standard one from Toussaint. Married to Pete, she of course was my aunt, and if I'd had 1,000 aunts instead of just her she still would have been my favorite. More to the point here, though, Marie was

Toussaint's granddaughter, and the only soul anywhere in that family who could get along with him. Most of Toussaint's sons wouldn't even speak to him, his daughters had all married out of his orbit as rapidly as they could, and down through the decades any number of his Rides Proud in-laws had threatened to shoot him. (Toussaint claimed he had a foolproof antidote to such threats: "I tell them bullets can fly more than one direction.") I myself remember that the last few years of her life, Toussaint and his wife Mary didn't even live under the same roof; whenever my father and I stopped by their place, Toussaint was to be found in residence in the bunkhouse. Thus all the evidence said that if you were a remove or two from him Toussaint could be a prince of the earth toward you, but anybody sharing the same blood with him he begrudged. Except Marie. Marie was thin and not particularly dark--her father was Irish, an office man at the agency in Browning--and only her black hair, which she wore shoulder-long, brought out the Blackfeet ancestry and whatever farther-east Indian heredity it was that Toussaint transmitted. So her resemblance to Toussaint really was only a similar music in her voice, and the same running chuckle at the back of her throat when she was pleased. Yet be around the two of them together for only a minute and you knew without mistake that here were not merely natural allies but blood kin. There just was something unmistakably alike in how each of them regarded life. As if they had seen it all before and shared the amusement that things were no better this time around.

But Toussaint's story of the first Fourth wasn't quite done.

"I took a turn at sentry. I was in there drinking with them. In Barclay's joint. Already an old man, me. Fifteen."

"Ancient as Jick," Marie murmured with a smile in my direction. If she but knew. Maybe my toot with Stanley that night in the cabin didn't break any saloon records, but it was spree enough for a starter.

"Jick has a few months to go yet," my mother corrected Marie's observation.

"I'm getting there as fast as I can," I defended, drawing a laugh from our assemblage.

—————

~~and~~ the good mood among the cluster of us was about to get better. My mother turned to Marie and asked: "Do you suppose these scenery inspectors have earned any food?"

"We'll take pity on them," Marie agreed, and the picnic provisions began to emerge from the pair of grub boxes.

The blanket became like a raftload of food, except that such a cargo of eating likely would have sunk any raft.

There were the chickens my mother spent part of the morning frying.

~~up~~ delectable young spring fries with drumsticks about the thickness of your thumb. This very morning too, Toussaint had caught a batch of trout in the Two Medicine and now here they beckoned, fried up by Marie. Blue enamel broilers of fish and fowl, side by side. The gateposts of heaven.

OK - fishing season
we have one

WPA Food Customs, in picnic file

Marie's special three-bean salad, the pinnacle of how good beans can taste. My mother's famous potato salad with little new green onions cut so fine they were like sparks of flavor.

OK - Carol & Harold's seafood

WPA Food Customs, in picnic file

New radishes, sweet and about the size of a marble, first of Marie's garden vegetables. A dozen and a half deviled eggs arrayed by my mother.

Grandma & Alma

A jar of home-canned pickled beets, a strong point of my mother's. A companion jar of crab-apple pickles, a distinction of Marie's.

have eaten both in Montana

Montana Cookbook, p. 57

A plate of my mother's ~~cinnamon rolls~~ ^{corn muffins}. A loaf of Marie's saffron bread. Between the two, a moon of Reese home-churned butter.

Grandma

~~A lard pail of fresh donuts by Marie. A gooseberry pie from my mother.~~
^{An angel food cake}
^{chocolate sour cream cake}

Joy Hamlett, Jan 5 1954 letter in checking file

My eyes feasted while the rest of me readied to. My father urged "Dive in, Toussaint," and the passing of dishes got underway.

"Been a while since breakfast," Pete proclaimed when he had his plate loaded. "I'm so excited to see food again I'm not sure I'll be able to eat."

"Too bad about you," Marie said in that soft yet take-it-or-leave-it way so like Toussaint's. And my mother didn't overlook the chance to put in: "Wait, we'll sell tickets. People will line up to see Pete Reese not eat."

"Come on now, Bet," Came the protest from Pete. "I have never eaten more than I could hold."

As they should do at a picnic, the conversing and the consuming cantered along together in this fashion. I think it was at the start of the second plateload, when we were all letting out dubious hmmms about having another helping of this or that but then going ahead and having it, that Pete asked my father if fire school in Missoula had made him any smarter than he was before.

"Airplanes," my father announced. "Airplanes are the firefighting apparatus of the future, at least according to this one hoosier we heard from over there." }

"The hell. How's that gonna work?"

"I didn't say it was going to work. I just said what the hoosier told us. They're going to try parachutists--like these guys at fairs?" }

"Say on," urged Toussaint, squinting through a mask of eager puzzlement. Toussaint always was avid to hear developments of this

sort, as if they confirmed for him the humorous traits of the human race. "That radio stuff," he had declared during the worst of the drought and the dust storms, "it monkeys with the air. Dries it out, all that electric up there."

"They're just now getting ready"
"Over in Washington they're about to test all this out," my father continued his report of latest up-in-the-air science. "Send an airplane with a couple of these parachutists over a mountain smoke and see if they can get down there and tromp it out before it grows to a real fire. That's the cheery theory, anyhow."

Pete shook his head. "They couldn't pay me enough to jump out of one of those." "Hell, Pete, the jumping would be easy money. The landing is the only drawback." My father readied to plow into another of Toussaint's trout, but first offered as if in afterthought: "Fact is, I told them I'd volunteer"--my mother's full skepticism sighted in on him now, waiting to see if there was any color of seriousness in this--"if the parachute was going to be big enough for my saddlehorse and packstring too."

The vision of my father and assorted horses drifting down from the sky the way the cottonwood fluffs were floating around us set everybody to laughing like loonies.

Next it was Toussaint's inning again. The mention of horses reminded him of a long-ago Fourth of July in Gros Ventre when everybody caught horse-race fever. "How it happened, first they matched every saddle horse against every other saddle horse. Ran out of those by middle of the afternoon. Still plenty of beer and daylight left. Then

somebody got the notion. Down to the stable, everybody. Brought out the stagecoach horses. Bridled them, put boys on them bareback. Raced them against each other the length of Main Street." The Toussaint chuckle. "It was hard to know. To bet on the horse, or how high the boy would bounce."

Which tickled us all again. Difficult to eat on account of laughing, and to laugh on account of eating. Give me that dilemma anytime.

All this horse talk did remind me about Mouse, and I excused myself to go picket him onto another patch of grass. Truth to tell, getting myself up and into motion also would shake down some of the food in me and make room for more.

Thinking back on that scene as I wended my way to the edge of the park where Mouse was tethered, I have wished someone among us then had the talent to paint the portrait of that picnic. A group scene that would have preserved those faces from English Creek and Noon Creek and Gros Ventre and the out-east farming country and yes, Toussaint's from the Two Medicine. That would convey every one of those people at once and yet also their separateness. Their selves, I guess the world should be. I don't mean one of those phoney-baloney gilt concoctions such as that one of Custer and all his embattled and doomed troopers there at the Little Bighorn, which hangs in three-fourths of the saloons I have ever been in and disgusts me every single time. (To my mind, Custer can be done justice only if shown wearing a tall white dunce

cap.) But once I saw in a magazine, Look or Life or one of those dead ones, what one painter tried in this respect of showing selves. He first painted little pictures of tropical flowers, in pink and other pastels; wild roses I guess would be our closest comparison flower here in the Two country. Some several hundred of those, he painted. Then when all these were hung together in the right order on the wall, the flower colors fit together from picture to picture to create the outline of a tremendously huge snake. In any picture by itself you could not see a hint of that snake. But look at them together and he lay kinked across the entire wall mightier than the mightiest python.

That is the kind of portrait I mean of the creek picnic. Not that very many of those people there in the park could be called the human equivalent of flowers, nor that the sum of them amounted to a colossal civic snake. But just the point that there, that day, they seemed to me each distinctly themselves and yet added up together too.

I have inquired, though, and so far as I can find, nobody ever even thought to take a photograph of that day.

When I came back from re-tethering Mouse, my parents and Pete and Marie were in a four-way conversation about something or other, and Toussaint was spearing himself another trout out of the broiler. His seemed to me the more sensible endeavor, so I dropped down next to him to inflict myself on the chicken supply. I was just beginning to do good work on my favorite piece of white meat, a breastbone, when Toussaint turned his head toward me. The potato salad had come to rest

nearest my end of the blanket and I reached toward it, expecting that he was going to ask me to pass it to him. Instead Toussaint stated quietly: "You are a campjack these days."

Probably I went red as an apple. I mean, good christamighty. Toussaint's words signaled what I had never dreamt of: moccasin telegraph had the story of my sashay with Stanley.

Everything that coursed through me in those moments, I would need Methusaleh's years to sort out.

Questions of source and quantity maybe hogged in first. How the hell did Toussaint know? And what exactly did he know? My dimwitted approach to a bobwire fence in an electrical storm? My tussle with Bubbles? My alcoholic evening in the cabin? No, he couldn't know any of those in detail. Could he?

The ^{unravens} possibility of Toussaint having dropped some mention of that last and biggest matter, my night of imbibing, into the general conversation while I was off tending Mouse made me peer toward my mother. ^A No real reassurance there. Her mood plainly had declined since the parade of the food onto the blanket, she now was half-listening to my father and Pete and half-gazing off toward the ripples of English Creek. Whatever was occupying her mind, I could only send up prayers that it wasn't identical to the topic on mine.

Geography next. How far had the tale of Jick-and-Stanley spread? Was I traveling on tongues throughout the whole damn Two country? "Hear about that McCaskill kid? Yeah, green as frog feathers, ain't

70/100
100/150
100/200
100/250
100/300
100/350
100/400
100/450
100/500
100/550
100/600
100/650
100/700
100/750
100/800
100/850
100/900
100/950
100/1000

he? You wonder how they let him out of the house by himself."

And beyond that, philosophy. If I was a Toussaint topic, just what did that constitute? The mix of apprehension and surmise was all through me. Plus a flavor of something which seemed surprisingly like pride. Better or worse, part of me now was in Toussaint's knowledge, his running history of the Two. In there with Phony Nose Gorman and the last buffalo hunt and the first sheep and the winter of '86 and Lieutenant Black Jack Pershing and the herded Crees and--and what did that mean? Being a part of history, at the age of fourteen years and ten months; why had that responsibility picked me out?

They say when a cat walks over the ground that will be your grave, a shiver goes through you. As I sat there that fine July noon with a breastbone forgotten in my hand, Toussaint again busy eating his trout after leaving the track of those six soft words across my life--"You are a campjack these days"--yes, I shivered.

My father's voice broke my trance. "If Toussaint and Jick ever would get done eating for winter, we could move along to the ^{delicacy} gourmet part of the meal. Some fancy handle-turning went into the making of that ice cream, you know. Or at least so I hear by rumor."

My mother was up, declaring she'd bring the cups of coffee if a certain son of hers would see to the dessert. Toussaint chuckled. And put up a restraining hand as I started to clamber to my feet, ready to bolt off to fetch dishes of ice cream, bolt off anywhere to get a minute of thinking space to myself.

"Do you know, Beth," Toussaint began, stopping her and my heart

at the same time; "do you know--^{is our} ~~that~~ potato salad was good."

A picnic always slides into contentment on ice cream. All around us as each little batch of people finished dessert and coffee, men flopped onto their backs or sides while the women sat up and chatted with one another.

} Chateau
4th of July '81
card in picnic
file

I, though; I wasn't doing any sliding or flopping, just sitting there bolt-upright trying to think things through. My head was as gorged as my stomach, which was saying a lot.

My father, though, acted as if he didn't have a thing in the world on his mind. To my surprise, he scootched around until he had room to lie flat, then sank back with his head in my mother's lap,

and his hat over his face.

"Pretty close to perfect," he said. "Now if I only had an obedient wife who'd relieve me of these dress shoes."

"If I take them off you," my mother vowed, "you'll be chasing after them as they float down the creek."

"This is what I have to put up with all the time, Toussaint," came his voice from under the hat. "She's as independent as the moon." My mother answered that by sticking out a thumb and jabbing it between a couple of his ribs, which brought a whuw! out of him.



Down at creekside, the high school principal Mr. Vennaman was stepping up into the stump rostrum. Time for the program, evidently. I tried to contain at the back of my mind the cyclone of thoughts about Toussaint and mocassin telegraph and myself.

"--always a day of pleasure," Mr. Vennaman's voice began to reach those of us at the back of the park. "This is a holiday particularly American. Sometimes, if the person on the stump such as I am at this moment doesn't watch his enthusiasm, it can become a little too much so. I am always reminded of the mock speech which Mose Skinner, a Will Rogers of his day, proposed for this nation's one-hundredth birthday in 1876: 'Any person who insinuates in the remotest degree that America isn't the biggest and best country in the world, and far ahead of every other country in everything, will be filled with gunpowder and touched off.'"

When the laughing at that died down, Mr. Vennaman went on: "We don't have to be quite that ardent about it, I think. But this is a day we can simply be thankful to be with our other countrymen. A day for neighbors and friends and family."

"Some of those neighbors, in fact, are here with a gift of song for us." Mr. Vennamen peered over toward the nearest big cottonwood. "Nola, can the music commence?"

This was interesting. For under that towering tree sat a piano. Who came up with the idea I never did know, but some of the Gros Ventre men had hauled the instrument--of course it was one of those old upright ones--out of Nola Atkins' front room, and now here it was on the bank

Ponderosa
County News
June 1, 1939
card in picnic
file

of English Creek, and Nola on the piano bench readying to play. I'd like to say Nola looked right at home, but actually she was kept busy shooing cottonwood fluff off the keys and every so often there'd be a plink as she brushed away a particularly stubborn puff of it.

Nonetheless, Nola bobbed yes, she was set.

I think it has to be said that the singing at events such as this is usually a pretty dubious proposition, and that's more than likely why some out-of-town group was invited to perform at each of these Fourth picnics. That way, nobody local had anything to live down. This year's songsters, the Valier Men's Chorus, now were gathering themselves beside Nola and the piano. Odd to see them up there in that role, farmers and water company men, in white dress shirts and with the pale summits of their foreheads where hats customarily sat.

} Ponderosa
Co. News
card

Their voices proved not to be golden, but not really unlistenable either. The program, though, inadvertently hit our funny bones as much as it did our ears. Because the chorus's first selection was "I Cannot Sing the Songs of Long Ago," and then, as if offering proof, they wobbled next into "Love's Old Sweet Song." The picnic crowd blossomed with grins over that, and I believe I discerned even a trace of one on Nola Atkins at the piano.

} Ponderosa
Co. News
card

Mr. Vennaman came back up on the stump, thanking the Valerians "for that memorable rendition" and introducing "yet another neighbor, our guest of honor this day." Emil Thorsen, the sheepman and state senator from down at Choteau, rose and declared in a voice that could have been heard all the way downtown that in early times when he was

first running for office and it was all one county through here from Fort Benton to Babb instead of being broken up into several as it is now, he'd have happily taken up our time; "but since I can't whinny any votes out of you folks any more, I'll just say I'm glad to be here among so many friends, and compliment you on feeding as good as you ever did, and shut myself up and sit down." And did.

*Eleanor
Co. News
card*

Mr. Vennaman popped to his feet again, leading the hand-clapping and then saying: "Our next speaker actually needs no introduction. I'm going to take a lesson from Senator Thorsen and not bother to fashion one." Two traits always marked Mr. Vennaman as an educator: the bow tie he perpetually wore and the way, even saying hello on the street, he seemed to be looking from the front of a classroom at you. Now he peered and even went up on his tiptoes a bit, as if calling on someone in the backrow of that classroom, and sang out: "Beth McCaskill?"

I knew I hadn't heard that quite right.

Yet here she was, getting up from beside my father and smoothing her dress down and setting off toward the speaker's stump, with folded sheets of paper clutched in her business hand. No doubt about it, I was the most surprised person in the state of Montana right then. But Pete and Marie were not far behind and even Toussaint's face was squinched with curiosity.

"What--?" I floundered to my father. "Did you know--?"

"She's been sitting up nights writing this," he told me with a cream-eating grin. "Your mother, the Eleanor Roosevelt of English Creek."

She was on the stump now, smoothing the papers onto the little stand, being careful the creek breeze didn't snatch them. She looked like she had an appointment to fight panthers, but her voice began

steady and clear.

"My being up here is anybody's suggestion but my own. It was argued to me that if I did not make this talk, it would not get made. That might have been the better idea."

"But Maxwell Vennaman, not to mention a certain Varick McCaskill, has the art of persuasion. I have been known to tell that husband of mine that he has a memory so long he has to tie knots in it to carry it around with him. We'll all now see just how much my own remembering is made up of slip knots."

Chuckles among the crowd at that. A couple of hundred people being entertained by my mother: a minute before, I would have bet the world against it.

"But I do say this. I can see yet, as clearly as if he was standing in long outline against one of these cottonwoods, the man I have been asked to recall. Ben English. Many others of you were acquainted with Ben and the English family. Sat up to a dinner or supper Mae put on the table in that very house across there." Heads turned, nodded. The English place was ^{directly before us} ~~the one~~ across the creek from ^{one of the Depression's countless vacant remains,} the park, with the walked-away look to it. If you were driving north out of Gros Ventre the English place came so quick, set in there just past the highway bridge, that chances were you wouldn't recognize it as a ranch rather than a part of the town. But from the park, the empty buildings across there seemed to call their facts over to us. The Englishes all dead or moved away. The family after them felled by the Depression. Now the land leased by Wendell Williamson. One more place

which had supported people, now populated by Double W cows.

"Or," my mother was continuing, "or dealt with Ben for horses or cattle or barley or hay. But acquaintance doesn't always etch deep, and so at Max Vennaman's request I have put together what is known of Ben English."

"His is a history which begins where that of all settlers of the West of America has to: elsewhere. Benson English was born in 1865 at Cobourg, in Ontario in Canada. He liked to tell that as he and his brothers one by one left home, their mother provided each of them with a Bible, a razor, whatever money she could, and some knitted underwear." My mother here looked as if she entirely approved of Ben English's mother. "Ben English was seventeen when he followed his brother Robert into Montana, to Augusta where Robert had taken up a homestead. Ben found a job driving freight wagon for the Sun River Sheep Company from the supply point at Craig on the Missouri River to their range in the mountains. He put in a year at that, and then, at eighteen, he was able to move up to driving the stage between Augusta and Craig." She lifted a page, went right on as if she'd been giving Fourth of July speeches every day of her life. "Atop there with six horses surging beneath him seemed to be young Ben English's place in the world. Soon, with his wages of forty dollars a month, he was buying his own horses. With a broke team in the lead and his green ones in the other traces, he nonetheless somehow kept his reputation as a driver you could set your clock by." Here she looked up from her sheets of paper to glance over to Senator Thorsen. "Ben later liked to tell

that a bonus of stage driving was its civic opportunities. On election day he was able to vote when the stage made its stop at the Halfway House. Then again when it reached Craig. Then a third time when he got home to Augusta."

When the laughter at that was done, my mother focused back down to her pages. "There was a saying that any man who had been a stage-coach driver was qualified to handle the reins of heaven or hell, either one. But Ben English, as so many of our parents did, made the choice halfway between those two. He homesteaded. In the spring of 1893 he filed his claim southwest of here at the head of what is now called Ben English Coulee. The particulars of the English homestead on Ben's papers of proof may sound scant, yet many of us here today came from just such beginnings in this country: 'A dwelling house, stable, corrals, 2½ miles of wire fences, 30 acres of hay cut each season--total value, \$800.'"

"Around the time of his homesteading Ben English married Mae Manix of Augusta, and Ben and Mae moved here, to the place across the creek, in 1896. Their only child, Mary, was born there in 1901."

Here my mother paused, her look fastened over the heads of all of us on the park grass, toward the trunk of one of the big cottonwoods

farthest back, as if, in the way she'd said earlier, someone was standing in outline against the gray bark. "A lot of you can remember the look of Ben English. A rangy man, standing well over six feet, and always wearing a black Stetson, always with a middle crimp. He sometimes grew a winter beard, and in his last years he wore a mustache that made him look like the unfoolable horse dealer he was. Across thirty-some years my father--Isaac Reese--and Ben English knew each other and liked each other and tried to best each other. Put the pair of them together, my mother used to say of their visits, and they would examine a horse until there was nothing left of it but a hank of tail hair and a dab of glue. Once when my father bought a horse with an odd stripe in its face, Ben told him he was glad to see a man of his age taking up a new occupation--raising zebras. My father got his turn back when Ben bought a dark bay Clydesdale that stood twenty-one hands high at the shoulder, very likely the hugest horse there ever has been in this valley, and upon asking what the horse's name was, discovered it was Benson. Whenever my father saw Ben and the Benson horse together he called out, "Benson andt Benson, but t'ank Godt vun of t'em vears a hadt."

Of all the crowd, I am sure my father laughed loudest at this Isaac Reese tale, and Pete was nodding in confirmation of that accent he and my mother had grown up under. Our speaker of the day, though, was sweeping onward. "Anyone who knew Ben English more than passingly will recall his knack for nicknames. For those of you old enough to remember them around town, Glacier Gus Swenson and Three-Day Thurlow both were christened that way by Ben English." ^{Chuckles} ~~Laughs~~ of recognition spattered

*change
laughs*

amid the audience. Glacier Gus was an idler so slow that it was said he wore spurs to keep his shadow from treading on his heels. Three-Day Thurlow had an everlasting local reputation as a passable worker his first day on a job, a complainer on this second, and gone sometime during his third. "Ben's nicknaming had no thought of malice behind it, however. He did it for the pleasure it gave his tongue. In any event, in their pauper's graves Glacier Gus and Three-Day each lie buried in a suit given by Ben English."

She put the page she had just finished beneath the others, and the next page she met with a little bob of her head, as if it was the one she'd been looking for all this time. "So it is a justice of language that a namer himself lives on in an extra name. Originally this flow of water was simply called Gros Ventre Creek, to go with the townsite. But it came to be a saying, as the sheepmen and other travelers would pass through here, that they would stop for noon or the night when they reached English's Creek. An apostrophe is not the easiest thing in the world to keep track of, and so we know this as English Creek."

She paused again and I brought my hands up ready to clap, that sounding to me like the probable extent of the Ben English history. But no, she was resuming. Do I never learn? My mother had her own yardstick as to when she was done with a topic

"I have a particular memory of Ben English myself. I can see him yet, riding past our ranch on Noon Creek on his way to his cattle range in the mountains, leading a string of cayuse packhorses carrying block

salt. On his way back he would ride into our yard and pass the time of day with my father while still sitting in his saddle, but hardly ever would he climb down and come in. His customary explanation was that he had to get home and move the water. He seemed to feel that if he stayed in the saddle, he indeed was on his way to that irrigating task."

My father had his head cocked in a fashion as if what she was reciting was new to him. I figured that was just his pride in her performance, but yet--

"And that memory leads to the next, of Ben English in his fields across from us here, moving the water. Guiding the water, it might be better said. For Ben English used the water of his namesake creek as a weaver uses wool. With care. With respect. With patience. Persuading it to become a product greater than itself." Once more she smoothed the page she was reading from. "Greater than itself. As Ben English himself became, greater than himself. From the drudgery of a freight wagon to the hell deck of a stagecoach to a dry-land homestead to a ranch of green water-fed meadows that nicely supported a family, that was the Montana path of Ben English. Following his ability, trusting in it to lead him past the blind alleys of life. This is the day to remember a man who did it that way."

Was I the only one to have the thought brim up in me then? That suddenly, somehow, Alec McCaskill and the Double W had joined Ben English in this speech?

Whether or not, my mother had returned to the irrigation theme.

"Bill Reinking has been kind enough to find for me in the Gleaner files something which says this better than I can. It is a piece that I remembered was published when the first water flowed into the ditches of the Valier irrigation project. Who wrote it is not known. It is signed simply 'Homesteader.' Among the hundreds, no, thousands who were homesteading this country then, maybe 'Homesteader' isn't quite as anonymous as 'Anonymous.' But awfully close. It is titled 'The Lord of the Field.'" She drew a deep breath. "It reads:

"The irrigator is the ^lone lord of his field. A shovel is his musket, gumboots are his garb of office, shank's mare is his steed. To him through the curving laterals the water arrives mysteriously, without sign of origin or destination. But his canvas dam, placed with cunning, causes the flood to hesitate, seek; and with an eager whisper, pour over the ditch bank and onto the grateful land. The man with the shovel hears the parched earth drink. He sees its face of dusty brown gladden to glistening black. He smells the odor of life as the land's plants take the water in green embrace. He feels like a god, exalted by this power of his hand and brain to create man-made rain--yet humble as even a god must be under the burden of such power."

I honestly believe the only breath which could be discerned in that crowd after that was the one my mother let out. Now she locked her attention to her written sheets, and the words it gave her next were:

"Ben English is gone from us. He died in the summer of 1927, of

take copy
←

a strained heart. Died, to say it plainly, of the work he put into this country, as so many have. My own father followed Ben English to the grave within two years. Some say that not a horse in the Two country has had a good looking-over since their passing." Which was one of the more barbed things she could have said to this audience, full as it was of guys who considered themselves pretty fancy horsemen. But she of course said it anyway and sailed on.

"Ben English is gone, and the English place stands empty across there, except for the echoes of the auctioneer's hammer." A comment with larger barbs yet on it. Ted Muntz, whose First National Bank had foreclosed on the English place from the people Mrs. English sold it to, without doubt was somewhere in this audience. And all out among the picnic crowd I saw people shift restlessly, as if the memory of the foreclosure auctions, the Depression's "hammer sales," was a sudden chafe.

My father by now was listening so hard he seemed to be frozen, an ice statue wearing the clothing of a man, which confirmed to me that not even he knew how far my mother was headed with this talk.

"English Creek is my second home," she was stating now as if someone was arguing the point with her, "for you all know that Noon Creek is where I was born and grew up. Two creeks, two valleys, two claims on my heart. Yet the pair are also day and night to me, as examples of what has happened to this country in my lifetime. Noon Creek now is all but empty of the families I knew there. Yes, there is still the Reese name on a Noon Creek ranch, I am proud as anything to

say. And the Egan name, for it would be easier to dislodge the Rocky Mountains than Dill Egan. But the others, all the ranches down Noon Creek but one--all those are a roll call of the gone. The Torrance place; sold out at a loss, the family gone from here. The Emrich place: foreclosed on, the family gone from here. The Chute place: sold out at a loss, the family gone from here. Thad Wainwright's place, Thad one of the first cattlemen anywhere in this country: sold out at a loss, Thad passed away within a year. The Fain place: foreclosed on, the family gone from here. The Eiseley place: sold out at a loss, the family gone from here. The Nansen place." Here she paused, shook her head a little as if again disavowing Alec's news that this was where he and Leona would set up a household. "The Nansen place: foreclosed on, Carl dead by his own hand, Sigrid and the children gone from here to her parents in Minnesota."

What she was ^{achieving} ~~saying~~ was a feat I hadn't known could be done. Her words, the tolling rhythm of "sold--foreclosed--gone from here," expressed outright the fate of those Noon Creek ranching families. Yet all the while she was telling an equally strong tale ^{with the unsaid.} ~~by omission.~~ "All the ranches down Noon Creek but one," had been her phrase of indictment. Everybody in this park this day knew "but one" could only mean the Double W; knew that each and every of those sales and foreclosures ended up with Wendell Williamson holding the land, by outright buy or by lease from the First National Bank of Gros Ventre. A silent echo I suppose sounds like a contradiction in terms, yet I swear this was what my mother was ^{ringing into the air} ~~achieving~~; after every "sold--foreclosed--gone from here,"

^{reverberating}
the ~~ringing~~ unspoken fact of that family ranch swallowed by the
Double W.

"English Creek," she was going on, "thankfully has been spared the Noon Creek history, except once." We knew the next of her litany, it stared us in the face. "The English place. After Ben's death, sold to the Wyngard family who weren't able to make a go of it against the Depression. Foreclosed on, the Wyngards gone from here."

"A little bit ago, Max Vennaman said this is a day for friends and neighbors and families. So it is. And so too we must remember these friends and neighbors and families who are not among us today because they were done in by the times." This said with a skepticism that suggested the times had familiar human faces behind them.

"But an auction hammer can shatter only a household, not the gifts of the earth itself. While it may hurt the heart to see such places as the home of Ben English occupied only by time and the wind, English Creek is still the bloodstream of our valley. It flows its honest way--" the least little pause here; just enough to seed the distinction from those who prosper by the auction hammer--"While we try to find ours."

She looked up now, and out across us, all the islands of people. Either she had this last part by heart or was making it up as she went, because never once did she glance down at her sheaf of pages as she said it.

"There is much wrong with the world, and I suppose I am not known to be especially bashful about my list of those things. But I think it could not be more right that we honor in this valley a man who

savvied the land and its livelihood, who honored the earth instead of merely coveting it. It could not be more right that tall Ben English in his black hat amid his green fields, coaxing a head of water to make itself into hay, is the one whose name this creek carries."

She folded her sheet of papers once, then again, stuck them in the pocket of her dress and stepped down from the stump.

Everybody applauded, although a few a lot more luke-warmly than others. Under our tree we were all clapping hard and my father hardest of all, but I also saw him swallow in a large way. And when he realized I was watching him, he canted himself in my direction and murmured so that only I could hear: "That mother of yours."

Then she was back with us, taking compliments briskly. Pete studied her and said: "Decided to give the big boys some particular hell, didn't you?" Even Toussaint told her: "That was good, about the irrigating." But of us all, it was only to my father that she said, in what would have been a demand if there hadn't been the tint of anxiousness in it: "Well? What did you think?"

My father reached and with an extended finger traced back into place a banner of her hair that the creek breeze had lifted and lain across her ear.

"I think," he said, "I think that being married to you is worth all the risk."

X

I lead the world in respect for picnics, but I do have to say that one was enough to last me for a while.

~~One thing sure: that was enough picnic to last me a while.~~

Toussaint's murmur to me, my mother's speech to the universe. A person's thought can kite back and forth between those almost forever. It was just lucky I now had specific matters to put myself to, fetching Mouse from where he was tethered and riding through the dispersing picnickers and heading on across the English Creek bridge to the rodeo grounds.

I was to meet Ray Heaney on the corral alongside the bucking chutes, the best seats in the arena if you didn't mind perching on a fence pole. Again this year my father drilled home to me his one point of rodeo protocol. "Just so you stay up on that fence," he stipulated. "I don't want to see you down in there with the chute society." By which he meant the clump of fifteen or twenty hangers-on who always clustered around the gates of the bucking chutes, visiting and gossiping and looking generally important, and who regularly were cleared out of there two or three times every rodeo by rampaging broncs. When that happened, up onto anything climbable they all would scoot to roost, like hens with a weasel in their midst, and a minute or so after the bronc's passage they'd be right back in front of the chutes, preening and yakking again. I suppose the chute society offended my father's precept that a horse was nothing to be careless around. In any case, during the housecleanings when a bronc sent them scrambling for the fence it was my father's habit to cheer loudly for the bronc.

No Ray yet, at our fence perch. So I stayed atop Mouse and watched the world. In the pens behind the chutes the usual kind of before-rodeo confusion was going on, guys hassling broncs here and calves there,

the air full to capacity with dust and bawling and whinnying. Out front, about half the chute society was already planted in place, tag-ends of their conversations mingling. "That SOB is so tight he wouldn't give ten cents to see Christ ride a bicycle backwards--Oh hell yes, I'll take a quarter horse over a Morgan horse any time. Them Morgans are so damn hot-blooded--With haying coming and one thing and another, I don't see how I'm ever going to catch up with myself--"

I saw my mother and father and Pete and Marie and Toussaint--and Midge Withrow had joined them, though Dode wasn't yet in evidence--settling themselves at the far end of the grandstand, farthest from the dust the bucking horses would kick up.

Other people were streaming by, up into the grandstand or to sit on car fenders or the ground along the outside of the arena fence. I am here to recommend the top of a horse as an advantageous site to view mankind. Everybody below sees mostly the horse, not you.

Definitely I was ready for a recess from attention. From trying to judge whether people going by were nudging each other and whispering sideways, "That's him. That's the one. Got lit up like a ship in a storm, out there with that Stanley Meixell--"

Keen as I could be, I caught nobody at it--at least for sure--and began to relax somewhat. Oh, I did get a couple of lookings-over. Lila Sedge drifted past in her moony way, spied Mouse and me, and circled us suspiciously a few times. And the priest Father Morrisseau knew me by sight from my stays with the Heaneys, and bestowed me a salutation. But both those I considered routine inspections, so to speak.

People kept accumulating, I kept watching. A Gros Ventre rodeo always is slower to get under way than the Second Coming.

Then I happened to remember. Not only was I royally mounted, I also was carrying wealth.

I nudged Mouse into action, to go do something about that four-bit piece my father had bestowed. Fifty whole cents. Maybe the Depression was on the run.

The journey wasn't far, just ^{forty} fifty yards or so over to where, since Prohibition went home with Hoover, the Gros Ventre Rotary Club operated its beer booth. I swung down from Mouse and stepped to the plank counter. Behind it, they had several washtubs full of ice water and bottles of Kessler and Great Falls Select stashed down into the slush until only the brown necks were showing. And off to one side a little, my interest at the moment, the tub of soda pop.

Montana Mag.
May-June '82 -
article in
checking file

One of the unresolved questions of my life at that age was whether I liked orange soda or grape soda better. It can be more of a dilemma than is generally realized: unlike, say, those picnic options of trout or fried chicken, you can't just dive in and have both. Anyway, I voted grape and was taking my first gulp when somebody inquired at my shoulder, "Jick, how's the world treating you?"

The inquirer was Dode Withrow, and his condition answered as to why he wasn't up in the grandstand with Midge and my folks and the others. As the expression goes, Dode had fallen off the wagon and was still bouncing. He was trigged out in a black sateen shirt and nice gray gabardine pants and his dress stockman Stetson, so he

looked like a million. But he also had breath like the downwind side of a brewery.

"'Lo, Dode. You looking for Midge and the folks? They're down at the far end."

Dode shook his head as if he had water in his ears. "That wife of mine isn't exactly looking for me." So. It was one of the Withrow family jangles that Dode and Midge built up to about once a year. During them was the only time Dode seriously drank. Tomorrow there was going to be a lot of frost in the air between Midge and Dode, then the situation would thaw back to normal. It seemed to me a funny way to run a marriage—I always wondered what the three Withrow daughters, Bea and Marcella and Valerie, did with themselves during the annual temper contest between their parents—but this summer was showing that I had everything to learn about the ways of man and woman.

"Charlie, give me a couple Kesslers," Dode was directing across the beer counter. "Jick, you want one?"

"Uh, no thanks," dumbly holding up my grape soda the way a toddler would show off a lollipop.

"That stuff'll rot your teeth," advised Dode. "Give you goiter. St. Vitus dance."

"Did you say two, Dode?" Charlie Hooper called from one of the beer tubs.

"I got two hands, don't I?"

While Dode paid and took a swig from one bottle while holding

the other in reserve, I tried to calculate how far along he was toward being really drunk. Always tricky arithmetic. About all that could be said for sure was that of all the rodeo-goers who were going to get a skin full today, at this rate Dode was going to be among the earliest.

Dode tipped the Kessler down from his mouth and looked straight at me. Into me, it almost seemed. And offered: "Trade you."

I at first thought he meant his bottle of beer for my grape pop, and that befuddled me, for plainly Dode was in no mood for pop. But no, he had something other in mind, he still was gazing straight into my eyes. What he came out with next clarified his message, but did not ease my bafflement. "My years for yours, Jick. I'll go back where you are in life, you come up where I am. Trade, straight across. No, wait, I'll toss in Midge to boot." He laughed, but with no actual humor in it. Then shook his head again in that way as if he'd just come out from swimming. "That's in no way fair. Midge is okay. It's me--" he broke that off with a quick swig of Kessler.

What seemed needed was a change of topic, and I asked: "Where you watching the rodeo from, Dode? Ray and I are going to grab a fence place up there by the booth, whyn't you sit with us?"

"Many thanks, Jick." He made it sound as if I had offered him knighthood. "But I'm going to hang around the pens a while. Want to watch the broncs. All I'm good for any more. Watching." And off he swayed, beer bottle in each hand as if they were levers he was steering himself by. I hated to see Dode in such a mood, but at least he

always mended quick. Tomorrow he would be himself, and probably more so, again.

Still no Ray on the fence. The Heaneys were taking their sweet time at the family shindig. When Ray ever showed up I would have to compare menus in detail with him, to see how the Heaneys could possibly out-eat what we had gone through at the creek picnic.

By now my pop had been transferred from its bottle into me, and with time still to kill and figuring that as long as I had Mouse I might as well be making use of him, I got back up in the saddle.

I sometimes wonder: is the corner of the eye the keenest portion of the body? A sort of special sense, operating beyond the basic five? For the corner of my right eye now registered, across the arena and above the filing crowd and top pole of the fence, a choke-cherry-colored shirt; and atop that, a head and set of shoulders so erect they could not be mistaken.

I nudged Mouse into motion and rode around to Alec's side of the rodeo grounds.

When I got there Alec was off the horse, a big alert deep-chested bay, and was fussing with the loop of his lariat in that picky way that calf ropers do. All this was taking place out away from the arena fence and the parked cars, in some open space which Alec and the bay and the lariat seemed to claim as their own.

I dismounted too. And started things off on an admiring note: "I overheard some calves ~~taking~~, there in the pens. They were saying how much they admired anybody who'd rope them in a shirt like that."

blood
1

"Jicker!" he greeted me back. "What do you know for sure?" Alec's words were about what they ever would have been, yet there hung that tone of absent-mindedness behind them again. I wanted to write it off to the fact that this brother of mine had calf roping on his mind just then. But I couldn't quite convince myself that was all there was to the matter.

It did occur to me to check whether Alec was wearing a bandanna this year, and he wasn't. Evidently my father at least had teased that off him permanently.

"Think you got a chance to win?" I asked, just to further the conversation.

"Strictly no problem," Alec assured me. All the fuss he was giving that rope said something else, however.

"How about Bruno Martin?" He was the young rancher from Augusta who had won the calf roping the previous year.

"I can catch a cold faster than Bruno Martin can a calf."

"Vern Crosby, then?" Another quick-as-a-cat roper, who I had noticed warming up behind the chute pens.

"What, you taking a census or something?" Alec swooshed his lariat overhead, that expectant whir in the air, and cast a little practice throw.

I explored for some topic more congenial to him. "Where'd you get the highpowered horse?"

"Cal Petrie lent him to me." Cal Petrie was foreman of the Double W. Evidently Alec's ropeslinging had attracted some attention.

I lightly laid fingertips to the bay's foreshoulder. The feel of a horse is one of the best touches I know. "You missed the creek picnic. Mom spoke a speech."

Alec frowned at his rope. "Yeah. I had to put the sides on Cal's pickup and haul this horse in here. A speech? What about? How to sleep with a college book under your pillow and let it run uphill into your ear?"

"No. About Ben English."

"Ancient history, huh? Dad must have converted her." Alec looked like he intended to say more, but didn't.

There wasn't any logical reason why this should have been on my mind just then, but I asked: "Did you know he had a horse with the same name as himself?"

"Who? Had a what?"

"Ben English. Our granddad would say, T'ank Godt vun of t'em vears a-- "

"Look, Jicker, I got to walk this horse loose. How about you doing me a big hairy favor?"

Something told me to be a little leery. "Ray's going to be waiting for me over on the --"

"Only take a couple minutes of your valuable time. All it is, I want you to go visit Leona for me while I get this horse ready."

"Leona? Where is she?"

"Down toward the end of the arena there, by her folks' car."

As indeed she was, when I turned to see. About a hundred feet

from us, spectating this ~~entire~~ brotherly tableau. Leona in a clover-green blouse, that ~~silver~~-gold hair above like daybreak over a lush meadow.

"Yeah, well, what do you mean by visit?"

"Just go on over there and entertain her for me, huh?"

"Entert--?"

"Dance a jig, tell a joke." Alec swung into the saddle atop the bay. "Easy, hoss." I stepped back a bit and Mouse looked admiring as the bay did a little prance to try Alec out. Alec reined him under control and leaned toward me. "I mean it, about you keeping Leona company for me. Come get me if Earl Zane shows up. I don't want that jughead hanging around her."

Uh huh. Revelation, all 22 chapters of it.

"Aw, the hell, Alec. I--" I was about to declare that I had other things in life to do than fetch him whenever one of Leona's ex-boyfriends came sniffing around. But that declaration melted somewhere before I could get it out, for here my way came one of those Leona smiles that would burn down a barn. Simultaneously she patted the car fender beside her.

While I still was molten in the middle of all that, Alec touched the bay roping horse into a fast walk toward some open country beyond the calf pens. So I figured there was nothing for it but go on over and face fate.

"'Lo, Leona."

"Hello, John Angus." Which tangled me right at the start. I

mean, think about it. The only possible way in this world she could know about my high-toned name was from Alec. Which meant that I had been a topic of conversation between them. Which implied--I didn't know what. Damn it all to hell anyway. First Toussaint, now this. I merely was trying to have a standard summer, not provide word fodder for the entire damn Two country.

"Yeah, well. Great day for the race," I cracked to recoup.

Leona smiled yet another of her dazzlers. And said nothing. Didn't even inquire "What race?" so I could impart "The human race" and thereby break the ice and--

"You all by your lonesome?" I substituted. As shrewd as it was desperate, this. Not only did it fill the air space for a moment, I could truthfully tell Alec I had been vigilant about checking on whether or not Earl Zane was hanging around.

She shook her head. Try it sometime, while attempting to keep a full smile in place on your face. Leona could do it and come out with more smile than she started with. When she had accomplished this facial miracle she leaned my way a little and nodded her head conspiratorially toward the other side of the car.

Holy Jesus. Was Earl Zane over there? Earl Zane was Alec's size and built as if he'd been put together out of railroad ties. Alec hadn't defined to me this possibility, of Earl Zane already being on hand. What was I supposed to do, tip my hat to him and merrily say "Hi there, Earl, just stand where you are, I'll go get my brother so he can come beat the living daylights out of you?" Or better from the

standpoint of my own health, climb back on Mouse and retreat to my original side of the arena.

For information's sake, I leaned around Leona and peered over the hood of the car. And was met by startled stares from Ted and Thelma Tracy--Leona's parents--and another couple with whom they were seated on a blanket and carrying on a conversation.

"Your folks are looking real good," I mumbled as I pulled my head back to normal. "Nice to see them so."

Leona, though, had shifted attention from me to the specimen of horseflesh at the other end of the reins I was holding. "Riding in style, aren't you?" she admired.

"His name is Mouse," I confided. "Though if he was mine, I'd call him, uh, Chief Joseph."

Leona slowly revolved her look from the horse to me, the way the beam of a lighthouse makes its sweep. Then asked: "Why not Crazy Horse?"

From Leona that was tiptop humor, and I yukked about six times as much as I ordinarily would have. And in the meantime was readying myself. After all, that brother of mine had written the prescription he wanted from me: entertain her.

"Boy, I'll have to remember that. And you know, that reminds me of one. Did you ever hear the joke about the Chinaman and the Scotchman in a rowboat on the Sea of Galilee?"

Leona shook her head. Luck was with me. That was my father's favorite joke, one I had heard him tell to other Forest Service guys

twenty times; the heaviest artillery I could bring to bear.

"Well, see, there was a Chinaman and a Scotchman together in a rowboat on the Sea of Galilee. Fishing away, there. And after a while the Chinaman puts down his fishing pole and he leans over and nudges the Scotchman and says, 'Jock, tell me. Is it true what they say about Occidental women?' And the Scotchman says, 'Occidental, hell. I'm cerrrtain as anything that they behave the way they do on purrrr-
pose!'"

I absolutely believed I had done a royal job of telling, even burring the r's just right. But a little crimp of puzzlement now punctuated Leona's smiling face, right between her eyes. She asked: "The Sea of Galilee?"

I cast a wide look around for Alec. Or even Earl Zane, whom I would rather fight with one hand in my pocket than try to explain a joke to somebody who didn't get it. "Yeah. But you see, that isn't--"

Just then, Mouse got into the act. Why he could not have waited another two minutes until I had found a way to dispatch myself from Leona; why it didn't come into his horse brain any other time of the day up until that very moment; why--but no why about it, he was proceeding, directly in front of where Leona and I were sharing the fender, to take his leak.

The hose on a horse is no small sight anyway during this process. But with Leona there six feet away spectating, Mouse's seemed to poke down, down, down.

I cleared my throat and examined the poles of the arena fence and

then the posts that supported the poles and then the sky over the posts and then crossed and uncrossed my arms a few times, and still the downpour continued. A wild impulse raised in me: Mouse's everlasting whiz reminded me of Dode Withrow spraddled atop that boulder the second day of this unprecedented summer, and I clamped my jaw to keep from blurting to Leona that scene and the handhold joke. That would be about like you, John Angus McCaskill. Celebrate disaster with a dose of social suicide. Do it up right.

Meanwhile Leona continued to serenely view the spectacle as if it was the fountains of Rome.

"I'll take over now, Jicker." Alec's voice came from behind us, he had circled outside of the arena on the bay horse. Peals of angel song could not have come more welcome. "How'd he do as company, Leona?"

Leona shined around at Alec, then turned back to bestow me a final glint. And answered: "He's a wonder."

I mounted up and cleared out of there--Alec and Leona all too soon would be mooning over each other like I didn't exist anyway-- and as promptly as I was out of eyeshot behind the catch pen at the far end of the arena I gave Mouse a jab in the ribs that made him woof in surprise. Chief Joseph, my rosy hind end.

But I suppose my actual target was life. This situation of being old enough to be on the edge of everything and too young to get to the middle of any of it.

There was this, though. At least Earl Zane hadn't showed up. Is it wolfsbane that the stories say will ward off a werewolf? If nothing else, maybe I had some sort of future as Zanebane.

"Hi," Ray Heaney greeted as I climbed onto the arena fence beside him. The grin-cuts were deep into his face, the big front teeth were out on parade. Ray could make you feel that your arrival was the central event in his recent life. "What've you been up to?"

"Oh," ~~my~~ summary seemed so far out of the question, I chose neutrality, ~~my~~ "about the usual. You?"

"Pilot again." So saying, Ray held up his hands to show his calluses. One hard oblong bump across the base of each finger, like sets of knuckles on his palms. I nodded in commendation. My shovel calluses were mosquito bites in comparison. This made the second summer Ray was stacking lumber in his father's lumber yard--the "pile it here, pile it there" nature of that job was what produced the "pilot" joke--and his hands and forearms were gaining real heft.

Now Ray thrust his right mitt across to within reach of mine. "Shake the hand that shook the hand?" he challenged. It was a term we had picked up from his father--Ray could even rumble it just like Ed Heaney's bass-drum voice--who remembered it from his own boyhood in Butte when guys still went around saying "Shake the hand that shook the hand of John L. Sullivan," the heavyweight boxing champ of then.

I took Ray up on the hand duel, even though I pretty well knew how this habitual contest of ours was going to turn out from now on.

We made a careful fit of the handshake grip; then Ray chanted the start, "One, two, three." ~~4~~ After about a minute of mutual grunted squeezing, I admitted: "Okay. I'm out-squoze."

"You'll get me next time," Ray said. "Didn't ^I see Alec riding around acting like a calf roper?"

Some years before, Ed Heaney had driven out from Gros Ventre to the ranger station one spring Saturday to talk forest business with my father. And with him, to my surprise and no little consternation, came his son my age, Ray. I could see perfectly damn well what was intended here, and that's the way it did happen. Off up the South Fork our fathers rode to eyeball a stand of timber which interested Ed for fence posts he could sell at his lumber yard, and Ray and I were left to entertain one another.

Living out there at English Creek I always was stumped about what of my existence would interest any other boy in the world. There was the knoll with the view all the way to the Sweetgrass Hills, but somehow I felt that might not hold the fascination for others that it did for me. Ordinarily horses would have been on hand to ride, one solution to the situation, but the day before, Isidor Pronovost had taken every one of them in a packstring to a spike camp of CCC tree planters. Alec was nowhere in the picture as a possible ally; this was haying time and he was driving the scatter rake for Pete Reese. The ranger station itself was no refuge; the sun was out and my mother would never let us get away with lolling around inside, even if I

could think up a reasonable loll. Matters were not at all improved by the fact that, since I still was going to the South Fork grade school and Ray went in Gros Ventre, we only knew each other by sight.

He was a haunting kid to look at. His eyes were within long deep-set arcs, as if always squinched the way you do to thread a needle. And curved over with eyebrows which wouldn't needed to have been much thicker to make a couple of respectable blonde mustaches. And then a flattish nose which, wide as it was, barely accommodated all the freckles assigned to it. When Ray really grinned--I didn't see that this first day, although I was to see it thousands of times in the years ahead--deep slice-lines cut his cheeks, out opposite the corners of his mouth. Like a big set of parentheses around the grin. His lower lip was so full that it too had a slice-line under it. This kid looked more as if he'd been carved out of a pumpkin than born. Also, even more so than a lot of us at that age, his front teeth were far ahead of the rest of him in size. In any school yard there always were a lot of traded jibes of "Beaver tooth!" but Ray's frontals really did seem as if they'd been made for toppling willows.

As I say, haunting. I have seen grown men, guys who ordinarily wouldn't so much as spend a glance at a boy on the street, stop and study that face of Ray's. And here he was, thank you a whole hell of a lot, my guest for this day at English Creek.

So we were afoot with one another and not knowing what to do about it, and ended up wandering the creek bank north of the ranger station, with boredom building up pretty fast in both of us. Finally, I got

the idea of showing him the pool a little ways downstream in English Creek where brook trout always could be seen, hanging there dark in the clear water. In fact, I asked Ray if he felt like fishing, but for some reason he looked at me a little suspiciously and ~~muttered~~ ^{mumbled} "huh uh."

We viewed the pool, which took no time at all, and then thrashed on along in the creek brush for awhile, just to be doing anything. It was semi-swampy going, so at least we could concentrate on jumping across the wet holes. Ray was dressed in what I suppose his mother thought were old enough clothes to go into the country with, but his old clothes were so noticeably ritzier than my everyday ones that he maybe was embarrassed about that. Anyway, for whatever reason, he put up with this brushwhacking venture of mine.

Whacked was what he got. My mind was on something else, likely how much of the day still gaped ahead of us, and without thinking I let a willow spring back as I pushed past it. It whipped Ray across the left side of his face and drew a real yelp from him. Also a comment to me:

"Watch out with those, beetle brain."

"Didn't mean to," I apologized. Which most likely would have buried the issue, except for what I felt honor bound to add next:

"Sparrow head."

You wonder afterwards how two reasonably sane people descend into a slanging match like that.

"Slobberguts," Ray upped the ante with.

"Booger eater," I promptly gave him back.

"Pus gut."

"Turd bird."

As I remember it, I held myself in admirable rein until Ray came out with "turkey dink."

For some reason that one did it. I swung on Ray and caught him just in front of the left ear. Unluckily, not quite hard enough to knock him down.

He popped me back, alongside the neck. We each got in a few more swings, then the fisticuffs degenerated into a wrestle. More accurately, a mud wallow.

We each were strong enough, and outraged enough, to be able to tip the other, so neither one of us ended up permanently on top. Simply, at some point we wore out on wanting to maul one another any further, and got to our feet. Ray's clothes looked as if he'd been rolled the length of a pig pen. Mine I guess weren't much better, but they hadn't started off as fancy and so I figured my muss didn't matter as much.

Of course, try convince my mother of that. Come noon we had to straggle in to get any dinner, and when she laid eyes on us, we were in for a scouring in more ways than one. Ray she made change into a set of my clothes--funny, how improved he looked when he was out of that town gear--and sat us at opposite ends of the table while we ate, then immediately afterward she issued two decrees: "Jick, I believe you would like To Read in the Other Room. Ray, I think you would like To Put Together the Jigsaw Puzzle I Am Going to Put Here on the Table

for You."

When I started high school in Gros Ventre, Ray came over to me at noon^{hour} the first day. He planted himself just out of arm's reach from me and offered: "Horse apple."

I balled up both my fists, and my tongue got ready the words which would fan our creekside battle to life again: "Beaver tooth." Yet the direction of Ray's remark caught my notice. "Horse apple" was pretty far back down the scale from "turkey dink."

For once in my life I latched on to a possibility. I held my stance and tendered back to Ray: "Mud minnow."

It started a grin on him while he thought up: "Slough rat."

"Gumbo gopher," I provided, barely managing to get it out before we were both laughing.

Within the week I was asking my mother whether I could stay in town overnight with Ray, and after that I made many a stay-over at the Heaneys' throughout the school year. Not only did I gain the value of Ray and me being the best of friends; it was always interesting to me that the Heaneys were a family as different from ours as crochet from oil cloth. For one thing they were Catholic, although they really didn't display it all that much. Just through a grace before every and a saint here and there on the wall and meal, ~~and by~~ eating fish on Friday, which eventually occurred to me as the reason Ray had looked at me suspiciously there at the creek when I asked him about fishing. For another, in almost every imaginable way the Heaney family was as tidy as spats on a rooster. (The "almost" was this: Ray and his sister Mary Ellen, three years younger, were allowed

liberties with their food that I'd never dreamt of. Take hotcakes as an example: Ray and Mary Ellen poured some syrup on, then rolled each hotcake up, then syruded the outside and began eating. A kind of maple syrup tamale, I now know enough to realize. When I first began overnighting with them they urged me to try mine that way, but the thought of my mother's response to something like that made me figure I might as well not get converted. At other meals too Ray and Mary Ellen squooged their food around in remarkable ways and ate only as much of it as they felt like. I tell you, it shocked me--people my own age leaving plates that looked more as if they'd been walked through than eaten from.) Ray's mother, Genevieve, kept that big two-story house dusted and doilied to a fare-~~you~~^{thee}-well. Mary Ellen already had her mind set on being a nurse--she was a kind of starchy kid anyway, so it probably was a good enough idea--and you couldn't scratch a finger around there without her wanting to daub it with Mercurochrome and wrap you up like a mummy.

Then there was Ray's father, Ed. You could hang your hat on Ed Heaney's habits. Every evening he clicked the lock on the door of the lumber yard office as if it was the final stroke needed to complete six o'clock, and if he wasn't walking in the kitchen door at five minutes after six, Genevieve started peering out the kitchen window to see what had happened to him. Another five minutes, Ed washing up and toweling down, and supper began. As soon as supper was over Ed sat at the kitchen table going through the Falls Leader and visiting with Genevieve while she did the dishes, his deep voice and her twinkly one, back and forth, back and forth. Then at seven

straight up, Ed strode into the living room, planted himself in his rocking chair and clicked on the big Philco floor radio. He listened straight through until ten o'clock--~~evidently~~ if somebody spouting Abyssinian had come on the air, Ed would have sat there and listened-- and then went up to bed. Thus everything in the Heaney household in the evening was done against the backdrop of Ed's Philco, and Genevieve and Ray and Mary Ellen had become so used to tuning out sound that you often had to say something to them a couple of times to make it register. In Ray, there was an opposite kind of consequence, too. Ray had heard so much radio he could mimic just about any of it, Eddie Cantor and Walter Winchell and Kaltenborn giving the news and all those.

But Ed, I was telling about. You couldn't know it to look at Ed Heaney--the lumberyard life had put a middle on him, and he was bald as a jug--but he served in France during the war. In fact spent I don't know how much time in the trenches. Enough that he didn't want to squander one further minute of his life talking about it, evidently. Just once did I ever manage to get him going on that topic. That Ed won some medals over there, I knew because Ray once sneaked them out of a dresser drawer in Ed and Genevieve's bedroom and showed them to me. You wouldn't expect medal-winning about Ed either. In any case, though, one Heaney supertime when I was in to stay with Ray some topic came up that emboldened me to outright ask Ed what he remembered most about being in the war. Figuring, of course, I might hear tales that led to the medals.

"Shaving."

After a while Ed glanced up from his eating and realized that Ray and Mary Ellen and Genevieve and I were all regarding him in a stymied way.

"We had to shave every day," he elaborated. "Wherever we were. Belleau Wood, we only got a canteen of water per man per day. But we still used some of it to shave. The gas masks they gave us were a French kind. Sort of a sack that went over your face like this"-- Ed ran a hand around his chinline. "If you had whiskers it didn't fit tight enough. Gas would get in. You'd be a goner."

Ed began to take another bite of his supper, but instead repeated: "Belleau Wood. About mid-day there we'd be in our foxholes-- graves, we called them--all of us shaving, or holding our shirts up to read them for lice. Thousands of us, all doing one or the other."

The other four of us waited, dumbstruck, to see where this sudden hallway of Ed's memory led.

But all he said more was "Pass the stringbeans, please."

#

—



Now that we were established atop the arena corral, I reported to Ray my chin session with Dode Withrow at the beer booth. Ray took what might be called a spectator interest in the Withrow family. He never came right out and said so, but his eye was on the middle Withrow girl, Marcella, who was in the same high school class we were. Marcella was trim in figure like Midge and had a world-by-the-tail grin like Dode's usual one. So far Ray's approach to Marcella was distant admiration, but I had the feeling he was trying to figure out how to narrow the distance.

Maybe the day would come when I was more interested in a Leona or a Marcella than in perching up there above general humanity, but right then I doubted it. I considered that the top-pole perch Ray and I had there next to the bucking chutes was the prime site of the whole rodeo grounds. We had clear view of every inch of the arena, the dirt oval like a small dry lake bed before us. And all the event action would originate right beside us, where even now the broncs for the first section of bareback riding were being hazed into the chutes alongside my corral spot. The particular Gros Ventre bucking chute setup was that as six broncs at a time were hazed in for their set of riders, pole panels were retracted between each chute, leaving what had been the half-dozen chutes as one long narrow pen. Then as the horses crowded in in single file, the panels were shoved in place behind them one by one, penning each bronc into the chute it would buck into the arena from. As slick a system as there is for handling rodeo broncs, I suppose. But what is memorable to me about it is the instant before