

Billings, High Plains Book Festival¹, July 22 '06

What I'm to share with you--tonight--began to become words a ^{LONG} while ago: on June 16, 1903. That day, a bearded man--
built about like me--filed with the U.S. Land Office his
declaration of intention to homestead "the following described
tract of land, viz: 160 acres of unsurveyed land in Meagher
County, Montana..." I can look out over this audience and ^{BE SURE} know
that a good many of you can find a similar homestead claim back
there among the family papers.

Because it hadn't yet been surveyed, that 1903 land claim relied on landmarks, such as "the west branch of Spring ~~Creek~~^{CRICK}," in its description, tracing around from one ^{LANDMARK} to another in a square until returning to the first spot, "the place of beginning."

Across the next fourteen years of paperwork concerning that homestead claim by Peter Scott Doig, my grandfather, the description of that land changed in some intriguing ways.

Surveyors with their theodolites and jake staffs transformed that original paragraph of pacing off from this landmark to the next one, into simply "Northeast quarter, Section 8, Township 5 North, Range 5 East." (To give you a bit of a mental map of this, that

homestead was southeast of Helena, about fifty miles, and way to hell-and-gone up into the Big Belt Mountains. It's locally called the Sixteen country because the crick ~~there~~ ^{THERE} flows into the Missouri River just sixteen miles below the headwaters ~~there~~ at Three Forks.) But that oddly poetic little phrase from my grandfather's original paperwork stayed indelible in our family line--"the place of beginning."

My people did ^{begin} ~~begin~~ there, in our immense journey of becoming Americans after hundreds of years in Scotland, there at that homestead which was called "the Doig place." My father and four of his five brothers, and his sister, all were born on that

homestead--the last of them in 1910--and being careful, slow-marrrying Scots, most of them were around there, off and on, through the late 1920s and even on into the 1930s, the decade when I was born. My parents came out of those years as full-fledged members of what I call in my book **Heart Earth** the lariat proletariat of their time--tugging themselves by the ropes of their muscles and the pulleys of their mind into ranch jobs--cowboying, sheepherding, foremanning in my father's case, and my mother, when her frail health would allow her, working as a ranch cook. Tagging along at their sides in these seasonal jobs, much of my own boyhood on ranches was within a few miles of

that original Doig homestead. / ⁵ So, in my growing up, what history
the family had was mostly of that Doig place. By now, nobody
has lived there for sixty years or more--yet it perseveres in me--as
my family's first step on the ladder called America. That
homesteading experience, that particular American saga, shared
by my family and some three hundred thousand other Montanans
in those first twenty years of the twentieth century, ~~has~~^s given me
impetus for much of my writing.

To me, this is the story in the bloodline--the accumulating
power of detail and speculation and wondering and questioning
that pulsed in me from knowing of my own homesteading

ancestors' hard work and harder knocks and those of that ghost population, all those other "places" where homestead families hung their names on the wind of time.

Well, where did it all lead, those homestead years? In my father's case, over the hill to a ranch where my newly-married parents soon began their years as the western equivalent of sharecroppers--we even called the arrangement by which my father would take charge of a herd of cattle or a band of sheep from their owner and graze them until shipping time for a portion of the profit, we called that doing it "on shares"--again, a phrase I

don't have to explain to this audience, unlike the ones a few weeks ago in Philadelphia, Boston, and Washington.

It was there, on that ranch my folks were running on shares, that the homestead past first hit home to me, when I was about eight years old. Among his many distinctive Montanan aspects, my father was a haymaker, a hay^{ING} contractor, on ~~this~~^{THAT} ranch, and I have two/distinct/memories.

One is of the day a dump rake broke down, and my dad remembered there was a similar rake back at the Doig place where he could get the part he needed to fix it, in that backyard scatter of old equipment that used to accumulate on so many ranches and

farms--maybe still does, on a few?-- for precisely that purpose:

rustyparts.com, out there behind the barn.

Off we went, my father and I, to the Doig place for our rake part, and to this day, I remember my shock at what happened when we set foot into the weedy yard of the ^{OLD HOMESTEAD} ~~Doig place~~. My father broke down. Broke down and wept. His tears, that day, must have come from the flood of memories. The stories, still powerful to him, of all those lives around him in his younger years, in that mountain basin where his and mine were now the only human eyes, and the sockets of windowframes of the abandoned houses stared blind, all around us.

/--My other homestead memory is luckily more cheerful. On the ranch where my dad was putting up the hay was another abandoned homestead, the Keith place, near enough for me to go and play in the old buildings. For whatever reason, among the delightful trash of the Keith place was that long-gone family's bank statements, which of course included canceled checks; sheafs of them, a Fort Knox of them. My imagination had just come into a fortune! I pretended they were money, I riffled them as I'd seen the guy who ran the roulette wheel in ^{WSS}~~town~~ do, I fanned them out like playing cards, millionaire-like I made paper airplanes of them... The currency of history, waving in my

ignorant eight-year-old hands, is my personal homestead portrait,
I suppose.

~~L~~et me now read just a taste of the first book that grew out of
all this background--you're probably able to guess which one--and
some years of research and tape-recording people out of my
family's past and, not least, that hefty paperwork file of Peter
Doig's homestead claim with that inadvertant bit of poetry, "the
place of beginning." A few minutes from now I will shape-shift
into a fiction writer and read a bit from my latest book, like I'm
supposed to do; I promise to spare you swatches of the nine books
in between.

So, from **This House of Sky**, here's a brief portrait of my homesteading forebears, starting with the first one to come to America--my great-uncle, David Lawson Doig, known as D.L.

“As promptly as he had enough offspring and income to keep the homestead going, D.L. devoted his own time to the hobby of raising brown leghorn chickens. He proved to be an entire genius at chicken growing. Before long, his bloodline of brown leghorns, with their sleek glosses of feather and comb, were renowned.

One of his sons remembered for me, "He went to the big shows in California and all over the East. Beforehand he'd bring in his show cages into our front room and he'd have his chickens in there...I didn't like no part of 'em--we all had to pitch in to take care of these blasted chickens--but he was one of the best hands in the world with his birds." The trophies won at fairs and expositions covered most of one wall of the house, and D.L.'s wife sewed a quilt from the prize ribbons. Until the Depression

and old age at last forced him out, D.L. could be found there at the homestead, a round deep-bearded muser fussing over his prize chickens, sending someone down to the railroad tracks in the Sixteen canyon to fetch the jug of whiskey consigned for him each week, and asking not one thing more of the universe.

The other brother, Peter ^{SCOTT}Doig, somehow made his way from Scotland in the spring of 1893, just after his nineteenth birthday. He had been a tailor's helper, and in the new land at once began a life as far away from needle and thread as he could get. For the first few years, he did the jobs on sheep ranches that his son would do a generation later, and which I would do, a generation after

that, as his son's son--working in the lambing sheds, herding, and wrangling in the shearing pens.

There can't have been much money in the ranch jobs which drew my father's father in those first years. But what there would have been was all the chance in the world to learn about sheep--and sheep in their gray thousands were the wool-and-meat machines which had made fortunes for the lairds of the Scotland he arrived from. What was more, this high Montana grassland rimming the Big Belt Mountains had much of the look of the home country, and had drawn enough Scots onto ranches and homesteads that they counted up into something like a colony.

The burr of their talk could be heard wherever the slow tides of sheep were flowing out onto the grass. PACE Between the promise of those grazing herds and that talk comfortable to the ear, Peter Doig found it a place for staying.”

The homestead story of my family, of course, has plenty of company on the Montana bookshelf. Rich Roeder, whom some of you may remember as fondly as I do as one of Montana's leading historians as well as one of its leading characters, read his way through more than fifty homesteader memoirs for a research paper he once did on Montana homestead women--and it would need an inventory at the Montana Historical Society to know what the full

total might be, by now. Besides the reminiscers, some terrific

writers have looked back and seen homesteads as literary

makings. Wallace Stegner, in my favorite book of his, **Wolf**

Willow, deals splendidly with his boyhood years on a homestead

just across the line into Saskatchewan. Mari Sandoz in the 1930's

gave us what I think is another classic, **Old Jules**, a kind of

composite memoir of homesteaders in the Sand Hills of Nebraska.

Old Jules contains one of my favorite lines in any book, when a

ranch cook cracks to the young Swiss homesteader about his

chosen land, "Great farmin' country. Never get your crops wet

there."

I put that token of small talk with a lot big behind it, right up there with the actual real-estate advertisement I came across-- from about 1910--aimed at luring dry-land homesteaders to the buffalo prairie up around Valier, where I went to high school:
“Aridity is insurance against flood.”

So, there we are, or at least there I was a couple of years ago, in this strange literary business of trying to get at some truths by making stuff up--drawn back AS A NOVELIST to that biggest homestead boom of all, one which doesn't get the attention it deserves in frontier history because it occurred in the twentieth century. The Montana land-rush/when my grandparents, and I'm sure some of yours,

snapped up that homestead bet with the government, came out
here and homesteaded tooth and nail. The record of homestead
entries, that start of paperwork such as my grandfather's, all of a
sudden looked like land hunger on steroids: in 1905, there were
not quite twenty-five hundred homestead claims entered in the
state of Montana that year, in the year 1910 there were twenty-two
thousand--and the big numbers kept pouring in until 1919, an
eventual eighty thousand fresh farms on the face of the Montana
earth. The state's population tripled in eighteen years, a
population explosion of a magnitude that it takes a Las Vegas to
produce today.

(SIZE
OF
OHIO
NY)

/ So, for a moment think of that prairie of our Montana
forebears as a vast tabletop, with these tiny figurines scattered on
it by the tens of thousands--sodbusters, honyockers, pilgrims,
dreamers, cranks, Jeffersonian yeoman agriculturists, greenhorns,
most of them new to the land, perhaps as many as one in ten of
them single women (schoolmarms, unmarried sisters or aunts or
daughters), out there with their shanties, their breaking plows,
their flax seeds, their Sears Roebuck catalogues, their buckboards
and their Model ~~A~~^T Fords. There they all are, around roughly the
time of World War I, on that thirty-million-acre table of earth,
and a great many of them, we know now, sooner or later teeter at

the edge of that weather-whipped and economically-tilted table:
some will jump, some will fall, some are pushed. It is all, I am
here to tell you, blood-ink for the writer.

Let's go now to that prairie archipelago of shanties, out there
amid hard water and harder weather, all those theatrical stages 160
acres in size upon which lives were played out, under the spell of
land-seeking. I've spent the last couple of years back there, at
least in my imagination, and let me now take you along into the
pages of this newly-born novel that is the result, **The Whistling
Season.**