Idaho Statesman reprint of speech moved to '05 Idaho Humanities speech file
The accumulated century of the weekly newspaper of Choteau, Montana, the grandly named Choteau Public Library actually is in red protective binders in the public library there in the small town of Choteau. And so, this evening the Choteau Public Library stays open past suppertime, and I am sitting there, as I have many times over the years, drooping,at the table on the library’s little mezzanine, going through old newspaper issues of a coastal town of Montana during the Depression years, the drought years.

In mid-February of 1939, the homespun local columnist reports that there had been a heavy fog, unusual to that climate and time of year. A stirring begins on the library stairs, and up comes a group of women from a Hutterite colony near Choteau. In their long skirts and country aprons, with voices of people who had lived in those communal dwellings, they brought in a sea of books — a young survivor of the Civil War, a recent emigrant from Germany, a prairie schoolteacher, a furry-legged horseman, and a woman with a deep voice who might have just stepped off the pages of Tolstoy. They stop and open the next red binder, the columnist is saying in the issue of May 19, 1939, “if the adage of rain 90 percent of the time is true,” a heavy soaking rain will come on the 21st. Steps on the mezzanine stairs again, a ranch wife appears, and after being overwhelmed by the fiction of the shelves, no nonsense about it as she flips open novels and reads or rests them on the basis of their opening sentence.

I re-open the red binder, to the next week’s newspaper, May 29, 1939. The downpour started in the early morning of the 22nd, it went all through the day and into the night, the two-thirds of rain before it quit. “Opposite for the crops,” the column’s homely observations had satisfaction in the mood of a housekeeper, and I sit thinking of all the rain that must have plunged him into these exact cold northern waters now, cut by the keel of the cruise ship “Crystal Harmony.” He dances and dances with the passion and privacy of a man who was handed his life back during the war, and his years, and his life as a man who in an earlier turn of his life had been a commercial fisherman in Alaska, and his years, and the forceful sucking of the fiction, the shelves, no nonsense about it as he flips open novels and reads or rests them on the basis of their opening sentence.

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I see it as part of the writer's job to keep an eye on such makings of everyday life — to keep literary watch on how the things we grew up with endure, and drift — and change.

The eye starts to "listen" and remember, to register for good how the way a rancher cocks his hat says something about that man. The ear starts to "see" and remember, how ordinary language can be made to glow, as if breathing on an ember, in a cold-morning cookbook.

Ellie Rodgers, features editor
tiny Valier, Montana, in the same pages with Eleanor Roosevelt's most influential teacher and Aaron Copland's best. Mrs. Tidyman, a membered teacher tells us that school could not afford her, and so here she comes: Pence's teacher began to command the enthrall with a slight, thin-legged lectern. At last secure in midair she would resolve toward the class, the enthrall which was very nearly more than the vault of bosom would come eyeglasses, tethered on a neck chain which still did not entirely vault her head from an eye-glass, from a small farmtown. As with finance, she seemed to declare, so with time and costume. They meant no more to her than that she eventually had to appear somewhere, with something on. This brought about her fame for occasionally gardening with her nightgown on, dark hair mussed free and spilling to the waist — and of course her flowers and vegetables encouraged to ally into whatever clumps and jumblest they would.

At school, she would arrive in dark plain dresses so alike that it could hardly be traced when she changed one for another; bunched her hair into a great black burl at the back of her neck, clasping it to class in the severest of shoes. She was buxom, much like my grandmother, with a half more sprigged here with the Greek and Roman myths she knew so entirely that she recited them to her children for bedtime stories, sprouting somewhere else with blood-red bouquets from Shakespeare, twinning now into a tale such as having seen the cowboy artist Charlie Russell when she attended the University of Missoula ...

The foliage of her learning laced everywhere through the school. She taught all the English courses, first- and second-year Latin, occasionally a course in Spanish, directed the plays, advised for the yearbook and newspaper, and oversaw the library. It could not be imagined where she might exist except in the midst of all this. She had taken leave for years to have four sons, and afterward decided the absence had been a mistake. Chinese peasant women did it properly, she reasoned, giving birth to their babies in the fields and going right on with their toil.

In the classroom, each hour, with the greatest of ease, she began like a conjuring, or a parody of one. She would clomp in and back herself onto a high stool behind a thin-legged lectern. At last secure in midair she would resolve toward the class, the enthrall which was very nearly more than the vault of bosom would come eyeglasses, tethered on a neck chain which still did not entirely vault her head from an eye-glass, from a small farmtown. As with finance, she seemed to declare, so with time and costume. They meant no more to her than that she eventually had to appear somewhere, with something on. This brought about her fame for occasionally gardening with her nightgown on, dark hair mussed free and spilling to the waist — and of course her flowers and vegetables encouraged to ally into whatever clumps and jumblest they would.

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outstanding teachers, and he wondered if
I'd be willing to share with you, as the
finale of tonight, some of my own makings
that came right out of a walking gospel of
the humanities--Frances Tidyman, my high
school English teacher. It's a description of
Mrs. Tidyman that I put in my very first
book, This House of Sky, and one which I am proud to say was picked for an anthology of remembrances of great teachers, titled "A Special Relationship--Our Teachers and How We Learned." My English teacher there in tiny Valier, Montana, in the same pages with Eleanor
Roosevelt's most influential teacher and Aaron Copland's best-remembered teacher tells us that the world's boundaries don't count for much there in the mind. And so here she comes, Frances Carson Teyman, on the page:
man, who through a full generation had been scanning the students in her English classes as if they were muddy pebbles in a sluice box, had me under her steadiest focus.

What I already had begun to know about Mrs. Tidyman was as unsettling as her stare. She was the least likely presence to be found in a small farmtown school: a mysteriously spiced waft of booklore and speculative notions and astonishing languages and . . . oddnesses. It was circulated that she cared almost nothing for money—that she habitually turned down the salary raises due her to forestall a day when the school could not afford her, and that she paid in stores by asking what amount was needed, scrawling the
sum into whatever counter checkbook the clerk happened to hand her, and forgetting the matter forever. In Valier, this quick blink of a system worked well enough. But in the county's main shopping town of Conrad, it left a pattern of misbanked checks bouncing behind her, and her husband had at last to fund a bank account there solely to cover her offhand signatures.

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At school, she would arrive in dark plain dresses so alike that it could hardly be traced when she changed one for another; bunned her hair into a great black burl at the back of her neck; clopped from class to class in the severest of shoes. She was buxom, much like Grandma with a half more plumped on all around; her mounding in front and behind was very nearly more than the lackadaisical dresses
wanted to contain. Leaning forward from the waist as she hurried about, she flew among us like a schooner’s lusty figurehead prowing over a lazy sea.

The mind of Mrs. Tidyman was somewhat like that jostling garden of hers—sprigged here with the Greek and Roman myths she knew so entirely that she recited them to her children for bedtime stories, sprouting somewhere else with blood-red bouquets from Shakespeare, twining now into a tale such as having seen the cowboy artist Charlie Russell when she attended the university in Missoula: In
the midst of a sorority tea someone deposited him with us—
dozens of fluffy girls, you understand, and he had been
drinking for the ordeal—and then the utmost indignity, they
took his hat from him and he had nothing to do with his
hands, and sat helpless, imprisoned. . . .

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the school. She taught all the English courses, first- and
second-year Latin, occasionally a course in Spanish, directed
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leave for enough years to have four sons, and afterward
decided the absence had been a mistake. Chinese peasant
women did it properly, she reasoned, giving birth to their babies in the fields and going right on with their toil.

That earliest watching I felt from this unprecedented woman, it turned out, was to see whether I was a thief. A few times a year, a school-wide set of vocabulary tests was given, every student then ranked against national statistics. The first test-time fell in the second week after I enrolled at Valier, and I attacked with joy. If there was one knack in me, it was to hold in mind any word I had ever seen, much the way Dad could identify any sheep from all others. When this first of the set of tests was scored, no one among
I gulped the relief of being out from under Mrs. Tidyman's suspicion, and sat back to see what the gale of her approval would bring. In the classroom, each hour with her began like a conjuring, or a parody of one. She would clomp in and back herself onto a high stool behind a thin-legged lectern. At last secure in midair she would revolve toward the class, the entire billow of her far up over us, with the lectern-top before her as if commanded to hover there. Then her hand deep into her dress front, and out of that vault of bosom would come eyeglasses, tethered on a neck chain
which still did not entirely stop her from losing them a few times each day; a balled handkerchief; a fountain pen, likely leaking; perhaps a fat ring of keys, or a shredding blizzard of notes to herself. Up would come her head from an unperturbed inventory of this rummage. A mild glare or a stern look of fondness—her shadings of expression could be baffling—fastened onto the last of the class to go quiet. With it might fall the entire total of her irony, the query Do you mind if I begin now?
At last supplied and delivered, she set at us. The day's assigned reading might be thumped open and launched into sheerly for the entrancement of hearing herself aloud: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness'—oh, people, can you hear those phrases ring against one another? . . . If there was agony and tragedy, so much the richer fancy: 'As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport.' When I read the headline of an airplane crash, people, first I wish that no one I know was killed. Then that no one from Montana was killed. Then that no one from this country. Then that no one at all would have been killed
—oh, people, the casual lightning bolts which come down on us . . . She would escort Richard Cory and Miniver Cheevy to their poetic dooms one instant, bring Ivanhoe galloping in to the bleats of chivalry's trumpets the next. Now Lady Macbeth in gore, now Portia pleading against blood. In Latin class, Mrs. Tidyman never could have us read in Caesar's Commentaries without declaiming on Caesar the man; could not declaim on Caesar without sketching Roman society; could not sketch the Romans without embracing all the Mediterranean, on and on in a widening spiral of lore and enthusiasm, glasses flying in her hand and bosom wheeling above the lectern like turrets searching for new fields of gunnery.
Like the hedgehog, Frances Tidyman knew One Big Thing: that books can be miraculous in our lives.
Miraculous things, books. Every so often, I wish we could re-weave time and bring forth a writer from his own neighborhood of history to an era where we need his particular eye and skill. Shakespeare, for instance, to write about the massive murderous idiocy of the trench warfare of World War One. Joseph Conrad to be aboard a moon voyage and tell us of the cold ocean of space.
Earthbound talents such as I am, though, can only keep trying to tell the stories of the land around us, in what William Carlos Williams called "words marked by a place." Keep on playing with the ingredients of life, mixing up the makings as creatively as we can.
It's the spirit I tried to express in Ride With Me, Mariah Montana, where one of my characters is a writer, somewhat reluctantly incarcerated in a newspaper job, and when he pulls in to fuel up a Winnebago on one of the storied highways of the West, he sees beyond the gas pumps the usual sign, AIR and WATER.
Before he can stop himself, he’s out of the motorhome and over at that sign--and in the ancient passionate compulsion to expand the story, he adds beneath in precise lettering: EARTH and FIRE.

# THANK YOU.