

I get this feeling that when Mont. celebrates its bicent'le in year 2089, one of central attractions is still going to be Mike Malone & me, tottering to speakers' stand together.

I hope it won't seem quite that long by the time I'm done, but what I'm saying to you today began to become words on June 16, 1903.

That day, a bearded man--built about like me--filed with the U.S. Land Office in Helena his declaration of intention to homestead "the following described tract of land, viz: 160 acres of unsurveyed land in Meagher County, Montana. . . . Beginning at the southwest corner Number One, which is about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles in a northeasterly direction from the source of the west branch of Spring ^{Creek} ~~Creek~~; thence one-half mile north to corner Number Two; thence one-half mile east to corner Number Three; thence one ^{half} ~~quarter~~ mile south to corner Number Four; thence one-half mile west to corner Number One, the place of beginning."

Across the next ^{fourteen} ~~thirteen~~ years of paperwork concerning that land 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." (Which, incidentally, is ^{up down} ~~just about the country~~ ~~about the country~~ miles from where we're convened here today; in the Big Belt Mountains above

Sixteenmile ^{Creek} ~~Creek~~. Not so incidentally, for me as a grade-school kid

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in White Sulphur Springs, those ancestral acres also ~~were revealed by~~ turned out to be not
~~the surveyors not to be~~ in Meagher County at all, but in Broadwater,
dominion of White Sulphur's arch-rival, Townsend.) Periodically, Peter
Doig attests on one federal form or another about expenditures in proving
up on his land claim--building three-quarters of a mile of wire fence,
digging ditches and planting wheat and rye (his land claim was made
under the Desert Land Acts of 1877 and 1891, and so the nurturing of
amber waves of grain in the Big Belts, well over a mile above sea level,
was part of the land-taking process)--in 1906, ~~the amenity~~ ^{the amenity} ~~construction~~ of a cattle
shed, 38 feet by 75 feet, as the words on his "Claimant's Testimony" ^{document} ~~form~~
say a little proudly, "constructed of lumber"--that is, not of logs or
poles, but the civilized commerce of sawmills.

All the while, too, the footings of a considerable family were
being created there in that high, harshly beautiful basin in the Montana
mountains. Six sons were born to Peter Doig and Annie Campbell Doig,
and eventually even a daughter. There continued to be periodic paperwork
on the land claim--the homestead where this sizable family was beginning
its American roots--as the coming of national forests complicated the
picture. Then, on a September day in 1910, Peter Doig was going to

the garden ~~land~~ when he suddenly clutched at his heart, fell down and died there on his claimed portion of America and Montana.

The Doig family story on that Big Belt land continued for another quarter of a century, until the Depression finally overwhelmed ^{even} the stubbornness of the Doigs and the other Scottish families of the Tierney Basin. The paperwork, on Desert ~~Land~~ Entry No. 8231, long outlived my grandfather; not until 1917 does it finally cease.

The next words are from the spring of 1945, from a rooming house in Wickenburg, Arizona. My mother is writing to her brother on a destroyer in the South Pacific, that last spring of World War Two.

She and my father have spent that winter in ^{Phoenix} Arizona, where my father worked in a defense plant while they ^{tried to see whether} ~~saw how~~ the Southwest climate might

~~mitigate~~ mitigate my mother's asthma, which had plagued her ^{the 33 years of} throughout her Montana life. I am on the scene now, at least marginally,

as a five-year-old who has spent that Phoenix winter digging a foxhole in the words of my mother's letter, "you could in the back yard that, ~~as my mother has written to her brother~~ bury a cow in."

There in Wickenburg, where we had ~~an~~^{alit} while my father recuperated from an appendicitis operation, Montana is on our minds. On the 18th of March, my mother writes: "We are getting kind of anxious to get home, see everybody, find out how I'm going to feel, figure out what we are going to do this summer."

Two months later, the postmark on another letter to her brother is (pause) Bozeman. My parents--and I--~~was~~^{were} ~~now~~^{out here} at Maudlow, and since having come north from the Arizona winter we ~~have~~^{already had} been at White Sulphur and Ringling, where my dad has worked a couple of lambing jobs. They ~~now~~^{now} were working for Frank Morgan, on a sheep deal at his ranch out here at the foot of the Bridgers, which would carry them through the summer. After that, my mother hoped it would not be the continual packing up from one job to the next. "I'd like to make money enough to settle down some place of our own this fall," she wrote. "I'm getting tired moving around, and with Ivan starting to school we are going to have to stay in one place."

This portion of my family story did not conclude well either, because that summer my mother died, of her asthma, there at the sheep camp in the Bridgers--less than ten miles from where my grandfather's life, and his attempt to gain the Doigs a lasting piece of land, had played out.

And so I'm left to wonder. My parents--landless people, despite my grandparents' long effort at homesteading, and both my mother and father in shaky health--they turned their back on Arizona and a Sunbelt life, there in that spring of 1945. Yet. . . why did they?

Something of that "why" echoes throughout this conference and across the vaster story of the peopling of the American West, I believe. It is America's federal system of spelling out "why's"--as well as how's and whens and wherefores--that in fact produced an entity called the state of Montana, rather than the Republic of Jeffersonia, let us say, or a explicitly named colony ~~called~~ the Anaconda Congo.

The making of Montana--and Montanans--by the American territorial system was celebrated at considerable length--possibly even by some of the usual suspects rounded up here today--during last year's centennial. , though, It took television to define the "founding fathers" of Montana, who

turned out to be cow herders on horseback staring at the rumps of Texas longhorns, in the intense ratio of twenty-four hundred cowboys to twenty-seven hundred cows. The centennial cattle drive, if it could have been satellited back into Montana's past, I think would have come as a considerable surprise, as a civic emblem, to Butte's miners, to the gandy dancers who laid the rails of the High Line, to the Gallatin's first farmers, to merchants and suffragettes, to dam builders at Fort Peck and smeltermen at Anaconda and Black Eagle.

No, the fact of the matter is, the system that produced Montana was invented even before television...and even before trail drives from Texas. The Northwest Ordinance enacted by the Confederation Congress in 1787 gave the future United States of America what a historian of the territorial system, Jack Ericson Eblen, sums up as "a relatively precise plan of colonial government for the public domain north of the Ohio River....Its provisions have laid the foundation for the governments of the thirty-one public lands states and Hawaii. In short, the Ordinance led to the imposition of a uniform system of politics throughout the American empire."

Now, I'm certainly not going to stand here and say Montana's politics have ever been uniform. (Except maybe in the sense of the fellow who was described as being perfectly even-tempered--made as hell all the time.) But it's undeniable that there was a political system--by now, one of the older ones in the world--a procedure of some order and regularity, by which a civic entity called the Territory of Montana and then another one called the state of Montana were manufactured. With its provisions for certain increments in self-government as certain levels of population were reached, until ultimate admission into the Union, the territorial system was deliberate and gradual; twenty-five years, in Montana's case, to become a state. Nearly twice that long, in the case of Utah. Certainly that start of the relationship between Montana and the federal government was a system that made for some grumbling. Mike Malone and Rich Roeder quote in their history of Montana the complaint of territorial delegate Martin Maginnis that it was "the most infamous system of colonial government that was ever seen on the face of the globe." (I think we can infer that Martin Maginnis had never been to the Belgian Congo.) But the American system--not only back there in territorial incubation but on through statehood and even until this very day--also accommodated a lot of grumbling.

The sharpest summary of a certain kind of Western grumbling toward Washington, D.C., was provided by a man who always said he wished he was from Montana instead of Ogden, Utah--Bernard DeVoto. In an earlier chapter of the conundrum of federal assistance and federal control, DeVoto said some Westerners were taking the attitude ^{to} ~~the~~ ^{toward the beds of} the attitude--"Get out...and give us more money."

emphatic
pause
If the ^{political} sovereignty system which Montanans and other Westerners sometimes have loved to hate, goes back almost as early as there was anything national about America, the land system goes back even before that. The Land Ordinance of 1785 provided for the surveying of the westward lands and subdividing them into rectangular townships and sections--in essence, putting a grid of square miles onto most of the American landscape. What an astounding act of ingenuity and legal description--
(hyoo-bris)
not to mention environmental hubris--this numerating of the land has been. As one historian put it:

"Most Americans and Canadians accept the survey system that so strongly affects their lives and perceptions of the landscape in the same way that they accept a week of seven days, a decimal numerical system, or an alphabet of twenty-six letters--as natural, inevitable, or perhaps in some inscrutable way, divinely ordained."

(Hildegard Binder Johnson, Order Upon the Land: The US Rectangular Survey and the Upper Mississippi Country)

Vernon Carstensen--

Another historian of the American land system, who happens to have been my mentor when I was in graduate school at the University of Washington, has had this to say about the American process of dominion over the land:

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"Men wanted and obtained individual ownership of land, and although they may never have heard of Blackstone, what they did illustrates his declaration that 'There is nothing which so generally strikes the imagination and engages the affections of mankind, as the right of property; ~~of~~ that sole and despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world, to the total exclusion of the right of any other individual in the universe.'" Carstensen continues: "It was understood and accepted that a 'set of words upon parchment' served to 'convey dominion on land,' or at least that it should. This view stood in sharp contrast to the Indian attitude toward land, an aspect of which is suggested by the perplexed declaration of the Cayuse Indian chief, Pee-o-pee-o-mox-a-mox, at the Walla Walla treaty council of 1855. He complained that he could not understand the talk by I.I. Stevens and the others there about giving goods for Indian lands. 'Goods and the Earth are not equal: goods are for using on the Earth. I do not know where they have given land for goods.' Pee-o-pee-o-mox-a-mox's words were probably as unintelligible to the government negotiators as Blackstone would have been to the Indians," Carstensen concludes, *He sums up sardonically,* "The land system spread upon the United States owes much to the values expounded by Blackstone; it owes little more than place names to the Indians."

For the vast tapestry of history to mean as much to us as it should, we need to look for threads of ourselves in the long weave of time and event. The American land system, in its evolution, produced a lot of us who are or have been Montanans. Richard Roeder has pointed out that Montana was the foremost homestead state--"Pioneers took up more land under the various public land laws in Montana than any other state," (more than thirty-two million acres.) The great majority of homesteaders in this state, however, ended up in some version of my grandfather's attempt to claim dominion over a piece of the American earth--badly outgunned by geography, climate, economics, and human limits of endurance. Time after time, the homesteads which were parceled out by that ingeniously ~~arithmetic~~ arithmetical survey system proved to be seed acres not of generations of yeoman agriculturists, but of families who scattered to other landscapes and livelihoods like thistledown on the wind. We did take root, but not always where intended. ^{pause} It would seem to me that some of that same sense of disparity between ideal, or dream, and the actualities Montana keeps bumping up against--maybe the profoundest saying I've ever heard is that life is what happens to you while you're laying other plans--that disparity

may be what causes conferences on Montana's relationship with the federal government. As we try to squint back through the legislation that has brought us to where we are today, I do have to remind you it could be worse--in the early days of American colonial history, Virginia claimed that its territory extended beyond the Appalachian Mountains to the Pacific Coast. As late as the 1780's, when both the territorial system and the land system were being fashioned into law, an explorer named John Ledyard who intended to do a reverse Lewis-and-Clark by getting to the Pacific Coast ^{and then} exploring America from west to east--Ledyard referred to the American West as the back side of Virginia.

Pause Yet, I still end up wondering. Does any of the skein of history that produced a state of Montana, or the thousands of pieces of land law that brought people here to become Montanans, does any of that ^{really} answer my own "why?" Why did my parents, landless and ill, come back to Montana out of that Southwestern try at a new life, one to die long before her time in the mountain air of the Bridgers, and the other to go on along a road of life here that he found very hard ^{without her} ~~alone~~. It is the "why"

stayed on even after going bust in
 of those who ~~came in~~ the homestead boom, of those who have persisted on
 ranches and farms, maybe of those who persist here, period, now that
 the Rocky Mountain West has become the nation's poorest region in terms
 of individual income. That kind of attachment to place, to landscape
 if not to owned land, I think comes out of legislation of an entirely
 different sort. Out of "laws" of stanza and rhyme, rhythm and imagination,
 rather than paragraphs of procedure.

Out of lines such as this, by William Stafford in his poem,

"Lake Chelan":

"They call it regional, this relevance--

the deepest place we have: in this pool forms

the model of our land, a lonely one,

responsive to the wind. Everything we own/

has brought us here: / from here we speak." (William Stafford,
 "Lake Chelan")

(21 min.)

Not all of us can speak that eloquently, of what ~~themselves~~ our native
 surroundings mean to us. But "this relevance, the deepest place we have"--

I believe Bill Stafford is pointing us to a reservoir of perceptions

beyond "a set of words upon parchment," beyond legal codes and land
 deeds.

It was the English poet Shelley, taking a moment out from his skyrocket life of lyric verse--"Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair"--who in 1821 said, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." I'm going to exercise a bit of dominion of my own here, and expand that when necessary to other sorts of writers and artists--in any case, to those who have tried to give expression to the perceptions and urges and attractions that tether our hearts to places, when we ourselves perhaps can't say why.

It took a quintessential offspring of Montana, Norman Maclean, to best say ~~something~~ how something can be both hidden yet apparent. Norman has talked about "the poetry under the prose." This of course can mean the rhythms a writer carpenters into his stories, the lengths of sentences, the chime of words. But I think in a larger sense it's also the kind of "unacknowledged legislation" that Shelley meant--rightnesses and truths that we didn't know we knew until somebody showed us how they could be said.

Take myself as an example, as writers are prone to do. My family's
 in Montana,
 history, by the time I was ready to go to college and ~~my~~ choice of
 occupation, was melancholy and desperate enough that a strange kind of
 hope ~~for me~~ ^{our household} was pulsing under it. A poetry under ~~the~~ prose, if you will.
 To radically sum up that situation, our lack of actual owned acreage freed
 me into the land of language. Away I went, from Montana, from a rural
 past, from the obligation or opportunity to make a living ^{out of} ~~from~~ ancestral
 property, to a more self-created world of writing. A few springs ago,
 that turn of career unexpectedly landed me overnight in Oklahoma City,
 in the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. Not, alas, as a cowboy. Instead
 the Cowboy Hall of Fame was showing an ecumenical spirit by giving me a
 literary award for English ^{Crick} ~~Creek~~, a novel full of forest rangers and
 shepherders. Anyway, there I was, with time before the ceremony to look
 around a little at the Hall's justly famous art collection, and I walked
 into a gallery about the size of a gymnasium, resplendent with Remingtons
 and Russells and Catlins and Bodmers--and [^] ~~^~~ couldn't really see any of them,
 because my eyes were riveted onto one painting, all the way across the
 room, an outline of blue mountains with a foreground of prairie and
 a pothole lake, which instantly had me saying to myself, "My God, I
 know where that is!"

"Home of the Blackfeet," that oil painting by Maynard Dixon is called,
and it's a scene that resonated into me from the summers when my family
was herding sheep ^a on ~~(~~Reservation lease next to the Two Medicine River.

emphasize

It may be in that incident, in that warm rush of recognition--of a place
that, after all, had not been economically rewarding, that had been
remorseless in its weather and hard on the endurance--it may be right
there that I was closest to understanding why my parents came back to
Montana from the Southwest: / reasons of the eye and the heart.

25 min.

Maybe what it comes down to--this "spiritual legislation" I'm trying to sketch for you ~~a bit~~^{Crack}--is that bit of inadvertent poetry all the way back there in my grandfather's first piece of paperwork as he undertook his Montana land claim: there amid all the legalisms, that description, before the surveyors showed up, of pacing off from the west branch of Spring ~~Creek~~^{Crack} and around in a 160-acre square back, as the descriptive lingo breaks into a lilt, to "the place of beginning." ^{In a larger sense,} The place of beginning can be one you were born to, or have chosen for yourself, or have been propelled to and made the best of--but always a place with that sense of possibility, that beyond-legal-definition sense of hope or urge or attraction. It's not the same for everybody, and Montana's landscape provides for a lot of different perceptions, which sometimes will argue among themselves, even poetically. There are the lines in Richard Hugo's poem "Pishkun," in which he ^{seems to be} ~~is~~ in the Russell Museum in Great Falls looking ^{the} at model of a buffalo jump--I would guess it was during a visit to the Choteau country and Hugo's great friend there, A.B. Guthrie Jr.; there's even the conjunction that Dick Hugo dedicated another poem, called "Pishkun Reservoir," to Bud Guthrie--in ^{"Pishkun."} ~~which~~ Hugo says:

"Charlie Russell, that fairly good, not really good,

sometimes good with yellow, often good with light,

never good with totals, total man, forgot

the world has garbage. He hangs ~~it~~

in a museum named for him, rare as bison

hung bewildered halfway down the stone."

That, I think, is a fascinating scrimmage of personages and perceptions of place: Charlie Russell, cowboy artist who originated in St. Louis, Richard Hugo, a born westerner ~~(in Seattle)~~ whose chosen earth was the Missoula campus, both of them frequenting the territory of Bud Guthrie, who grew up in Choteau and then had a newspaper career in Kentucky and after writing Montana's emblematic book, ~~The Big Sky~~^E, moved back to live almost within arm's reach of the Rocky Mountain Front. And each of them, in his own way, Montanan to the core.

The sets of systems I've scanned across here today--the acknowledged of property and politics laws and the unacknowledged legislation of perceptions--don't always mesh comfortably. ~~Thinking of the West~~ There's a stark example in the pamphlet

put out by the Territory of Washington's Board of Immigration Commissioners in 1875. They undertook to sort out newcomers' of the West perceptions right away:

their promotional pamphlet began,

"The Territory possesses dormant wealth and resources, all that is required is their development. Kid-gloved men, persons of extremely fine sensibilities are not the characters to develop these, but the hardy, laborious and courageous man who fears not toil, and is willing to work hard at present that he may enjoy his ease hereafter....

"Literary men and loiterers are not wanted and had better keep away."

pause

By now we at least know what happened to the literary types--they

headed east from Puget Sound to the real west, and populated Montana. *29 min*

All in all, then,

~~So~~, I think what I read from most of a century of ^afamily history focused in Montana, and from the evolutions of law about land and political sovereignty in the American West, is that whether or not

they admit it, or even know how to express it, people out here respond

to their landscape in considerably ^{aesthetic} ~~aesthetic~~ terms. *In pretty fine sensibilities, you might even say.* That needs to be

remembered, and taken into account, when issues of wilderness, and who

is to have domain over the land for what purpose, are brought up. I

believe it's ^{only} ~~a~~ matter of ^{honest} ~~self~~-recognition, this aesthetic or poetic side

of you. After all, Montana ^a ~~while~~ back chose to say on its license plates

The Big Sky--not The Big Piece of Property.

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