



lighter place: a skirt in stained-glass colors,
the young Byron might have worn.
de.

G. Hook Woman," an informative brochure.



485 Seventh Avenue • New York • 10018

AVELER

MAGIC MOUNTAINS

Continued from Page 8

olives, vineyards and wheat; others frescoes, neatly arranged by a Renaissance painter, of cypresses, towers and castles. But these are not the mountains that flash through my mind at the mention of the word. "My" mountains will always be the great wedges of granite that rear up, like monolithic sharks' teeth, across the valley from the town in southern Italy where, long ago, I lived. They were known locally as "Our Dolomites" and mentioned with apologetic pride: we had nothing truly unique to offer. The town was like that too. We claimed endearing qualities for it, yet we knew what others, those few who ever passed through, thought: it was bare, isolated, backward. Even our Norman tower was not quite what it ought to be because it was attached to the vast mosaic of stone huts and hovels that was the town. Still, we had Our Dolomites.

I was very young and alone and as isolated from the other inhabitants as the town was from all that was modern Italy. I was a foreigner, an anomaly, a woman unattached, yet one with some power (I represented a British social agency) or so it was thought. Decisions about the simplest things — to go to a cafe, to buy from this grocer rather than that one — had to be right the first time. I could never be seen to hesitate or doubt the wisdom of my own acts. But of course I did, turning myself into a stupor of loneliness. Then I would drive out just beyond the town, pull the car off the road and watch Our Dolomites. As the light changed, the sun, setting, reddened them; or clouds strutted by, shading them in jagged gloom; or veils of mist slipped in and out among the ridges, exploring. They never failed me. The fact that they were and always had been, that they had survived, always changing, brought elusive peace. I could go home to wrestle again, alone, with those decisions, and I could try again to treat fairly with people who claimed so much more from me than I could give.

A great many years have passed, but I still feel that these mountains somehow taught me to be alone — yet never lonely. When I am there now, I always stop for a moment, and I always

remember the town gossips who, each time I went to see Our Dolomites, reported faithfully that I had met my "amante." Some unlucky traveling salesman, no doubt.

Closing in on The Rockies

By Ivan Doig

AUTHOR OF "ENGLISH CREEK"
(ATHENEUM)

Some summers I watched the neighboring family of mountains from first light to last. Although they loomed near enough that I could feel their breath, the wind, I had never been in their midst, and only our locally prominent ones did I know by name: Walling Reef, Heart Butte, Split Mountain. The rest of the northern Montana Rockies, above the grainfields where I was a teen-age tractor driver, were an anonymous wild clan — a temperamental skyline where a hundred summits sat and shared the sun one moment, veiled themselves from one another in rain squalls the next. Outsider though I was, the reliably unpredictable behavior of that mountain throng fascinated me. Someday, I promised myself, I would go up there among them.

At the end of one of those summers I glanced away from the mountains toward college and career, and when I looked again I was 20 years older, although the mountains didn't seem to be. Someday had arrived, and was already departing, as my wife, Carol, and I climbed the trail out of my remembered mountains on the Fourth of July, 1977. Our backpack trip into the Bob Marshall Wilderness had been gloriously solitary: only sun, frost, wind, wildflowers and us. We had dined on trout caught in Strawberry Creek. We had not been dined on by grizzlies. Now, after four hiking days and 30 miles at the knees and in the laps of the mountains, we abruptly were riding on a shoulder. Behind us, below us, lay the Continental Divide. Ahead, our exit — a colossal bowl of steep rock-and-timber slopes, and beyond, through a cracklike notch, the northern Montana plains, patterned into the chocolate and gold of strip farming. Suddenly I recog-

(Continued on Page 14)

What Europeans
Do To When They're
Bored With White
Wine.

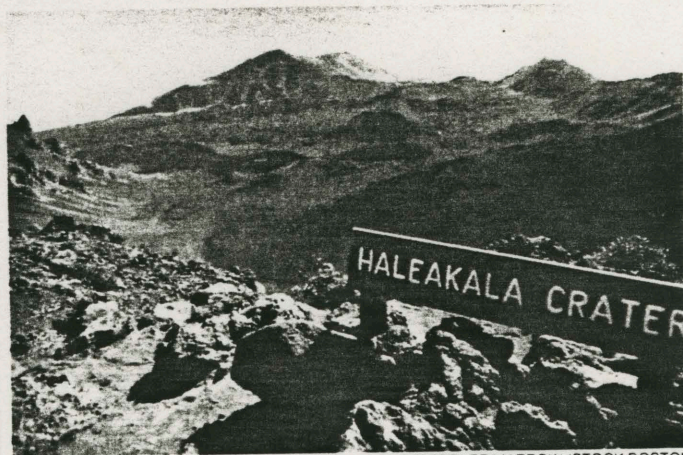


at has swept the continent. Icy cold Tio Pepe.
ld dry alternative to mere white wine.

© 1985. Imported by "21" Brands, Inc., N.Y., N.Y.
RAVELER

MAGIC MOUNTAINS

Continued from Page 12



CHRISTOPHER MARROW/STOCK BOSTON

At the edge of the House of the Sun.

nized the exact peak we were on. Hadn't I gazed at it for entire summers from those fields? A squall came, dived on us, scurried us into the shelter of jack pines. As we waited out the weather tantrum, I inspected our map for the name of this familiar mountain to add to all the others — Bighorn Mountain, Cap Mountain, Crooked Mountain, Bum Shot Mountain — I had been memorizing as I encountered them. This final member of the clan was called simply, rightly, Family Peak.

House of the Hawaiian Sun

By Fletcher Knebel
AUTHOR OF "POKER GAME"
(DOUBLEDAY)

It's a friendly mountain, lending its long, smooth flanks to towns, farms and ranches as it sweeps down to the sea, yet it has commanding dignity, a kind of noble presence and, for its intimates, a resonant tranquility and sense of magic.

It bears the name Haleakala (House of the Sun), and it dominates the eastern half of the island of Maui in the Hawaiian chain. Although its summit stands only 10,032 feet above sea level, not lofty by the standards of the fierce storm-lashed peaks of the Himalayas or Andes, this island mountain has rare power to touch souls and imprint memories.

It is the inner Haleakala — a vast crater with pink and mauve cinder cones, drifting clouds, fields of yellow primroses, the shining silversword plant (unique to this island), wild goats, the flashing crimson iiwi bird and endless har-

monies of silence — that offers a spiritual experience to those who come to visit or commune with this dormant volcano.

Tens of thousands of tourists have driven to the summit in early morning and watched in awe as the sun rose over the eastern rim of a crater that could hold all of Manhattan comfortably. But to feel Haleakala's magic, one must descend by foot or horse 3,000 feet to the floor of the crater, which was formed by volcanic upheavals centuries ago. Unlike the active lava founts of Mauna Loa and Kilauea on the neighboring island of Hawaii, Haleakala has not erupted since about 1790.

The mountain poses no challenge to hardy climbers: no walls to scale; no need to hammer pitons; no crevices to tumble into; no avalanches to bury the unwary. One can drive to the summit, then hike down into the crater and prowl a moonscape that suddenly blooms with patches of white clover, tarweed or mountain pilo. In fact, one can contrive to spend several days in the crater without ever trudging uphill. Instead, the hiker can exit via Kaupo Gap on a long downward trail that ends a few miles from the drowsy, flower-scented town of Hana.

Magic dwells in this great bowl in the sky, holy ground to the ancient Hawaiians and "the sublimist spectacle" to Mark Twain, who rolled boulders down its sides 120 years ago. Some hikers return year after year, never tiring of the crater's spell, woven of the silences, the wildflowers, the jagged walls, the sudden mists and the far pastel vistas.

Twilight, with its lavender
(Continued on Page 79)

TRYING TO PLACE IT

MOST likely I shouldn't admit this until I have the honorary degree safely in hand tomorrow, but part of the plot of *English Creek*, my novel that will be published this fall, involves a Montana family of the 1930s, who badly want their son to go to Bozeman to college—and he just as badly doesn't want to go. Had I known I was going to be asked here for this commencement weekend, I might have made that boy more reasonable toward this place.

→ Place is in fact what I want to talk about here tonight—a Western writer's sense of place, in the literary currents of the world; and my own sense of place from having been born and raised in Montana. ~~here~~

Fairly often these days, contemporary writing about the West of America is called a literature of place. A literature, I suppose that means, which focuses on the land, rather than on people. Often the book titles themselves have seemed to say so: *The Big Sky*. . . *Wolf Willow*. . . *Winds of Morning*. . . *A River Runs Through It*. (Put them together right, you could make a kind of sagebrush haiku out of these titles of Western literature.) The critical notion, as I savvy it, is that the immensities of the West, its extremes of landform and its powerful weather and the distances which flabbergast travelers from elsewhere in this country—these immensities overwhelm the fact of the people thinly salt-and-peppered across the expanse.

"Place," in terms of landscape, backdrop of mountain and of plain and of hard weather, *does* figure large in the work of a lot of us who are trying to write about the West. But I don't particularly think it's at the neglect of the people, the human stories, the Westerners who carry on their lives against the big bold landscapes of those books. Norman Maclean's flyfishing brother of *A River Runs Through It*; no one who has read that story and has any imagination at all can wet

a line in a trout stream now without seeing, in the shadow on the water, Paul Maclean making his powerful, beautiful cast. Ellen Webb of Mildred Walker's novel *Winter Wheat*, stepping straight from a wheatfield to a university campus. Jim Welch's men of the reservations, Jim Loney and Myron Pretty Weasel, and Lame Bull, and the never-named narrator of *Winter in the Blood*. I hope, maybe also on the list, Charlie Doig and Bessie Ringer of *This House of Sky*—all of them, characters of modern Western literature who seem to have found a continuing life in the minds of readers.

In short, a geographic sense of place is a flavorful ingredient in Western literature, but let's don't think it's the whole supper.

For there are other senses of place than the merely geographic. A bunch of them. The word *place* has so many meanings it takes up about three-and-a-half pages in the Oxford English Dictionary—and in my own American Heritage Dictionary that I instantly retreated to, thirteen different definitions of *place* as a noun, twelve usages as a verb. A word that sprawls all over the place—which is a phrase I didn't find anywhere amid all those definitions. *Western*

So, I have my own senses of place, as a writer with a Montana upbringing. Let me try to bring out three of them, and to think out loud at you about how they seem to affect me.

Begin with the beginning. I come from a place. I originate, as an American, from a place in a specific Montana sense of the word—another usage which doesn't seem to have reached the dictionary-makers of Oxford and Boston. Place, meaning an abandoned homestead. Small ranch or farm, either one, but abandoned, given up on, because of the winter of 1919 or the bank failures that rippled through Montana in the early 1920s or the Depression, or death or disgust or any other of a hundred reasons.

I tried to explain this locally prevalent use in this passage of *House of Sky*:

By the time I was a boy and Dad was trying in his own right to put together a life again, the doubt and defeat in the valley's history had tamped down into a single word. Anyone of Dad's generation always talked of a piece of land where some worn-out family eventually had lost to weather or market prices not as a farm or a ranch or even a homestead, but as a place. All those empty little clearings which ghosted that sage countryside—just the McLoughlin place there by that butte, the Vinton place over this ridge, the Kuhnes place, the Catlin place, the Winters place, the McReynolds place, all the tens of dozens of sites where families lit in the valley or its rimming foothills, couldn't hold on, and drifted off. All of them epitaphed with that barest of words, place.

The Doig place, in the Big Belt Mountains [not all that many miles north of here,] is where my Scottish grandparents seeded this family into America. 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-marrying Scots,

most of them were around there, off and on, through the late 1920s and even on into the 1930s. Part of my own boyhood on ranches was within a few miles of that original Doig homestead. So, in my growing up, what history the family had was mostly of that place. By now, nobody has lived there for forty years or more—yet it perseveres in us. When Annick Smith and Beth Chadwick were looking for somewhere to film their movie *Heartland*, they phoned me in Seattle and asked if I thought the Doig place would be suitable. I told them I didn't know—the house was still standing, but the site is awful damn remote and high and winterish, and they were calling late in the year—but if they wanted to take a look, they should get in touch with my Dad's cousin, Walter Doig, who I knew still went fishing back in there. They did, and Walter tried to take Annick and Beth in there, but had to give up when their four-wheel-drive started bulldozing snow over the top of its radiator. A homestead over by Harlowton was chosen instead for *Heartland*—the Doig place not for the first time missed its date with destiny—but as Beth Chadwick wrote me in a Christmas card, "I want to thank you for leading us to Walter Doig, who although he couldn't show us the old homestead, was full of wonderful words and stories, some of which I couldn't resist sticking in the script."

So, there is in me *this* sense of place—an awareness of that homestead, that Doig place, as my family's first footprint in America—and that though it leads away from that snow-catching basin high in the Big Belt Mountains, we've been busy ever since with words and stories of it.

A second sense of place, this one from my *own* growing-up years in the West, rather than my family's. Which place is mine? Any of you who have worked on a ranch or farm crew may recognize this one. The first day on the job, the first meal you go to there, breakfast most likely, you are fifteen or sixteen or seventeen, plenty big enough to hire out to pile bales of hay or pick rock or summer fallow, but awfully young socially, and you troop in with the rest of the crew, who begin seating themselves along the twenty-foot table, and you stand there with your face hanging out, until the cook or the boss's wife finally points to a certain plate and set of utensils, and says, "Why don't you take that place, there?" And you do, you go ahead and sit down, and it's yours for the summer, unless somebody gets thirsty and quits, and you are moved up into that place. The places, of course, get more and more permanent toward the head of the table. The cook's place, the choreboy's place—you would have to go to the Holy Land to find more sacred spots than those.

And then came the years when I was twenty and twenty-one, and coming home from college to a ranch where I had a different place at the table every time. My father and my grandmother were hired hands on that ranch—my grandmother was the cook, they lived in half of the cookhouse—and so I would come to stay with them between quarters at college, and work there in the summers. I

never liked that ranch, didn't like the way it was run, didn't like being around purebred cattle that were worth more than my father and grandmother and I were being paid in a year, didn't even like that part of Montana after having lived my high school years up in the Dupuyer country. And as a summer hand there I was a bit of a perplexity. Whenever we were rained out of haying, for instance, I'd head on into the cookhouse and read a book, instead of standing around in the machine shop watching it rain. But the rancher put up with me, for the sake of my father and grandmother, and he granted that I did have enough common sense to be able to pile bales of hay.

Through all this, the visits and the summer jobs, I was pretty much a floater at meal times. It was a kind of a hectic ranch, there seldom were the same number of people at any two meals—the rancher himself ate breakfast with us, maybe he and his wife would come down from the big house for supper or dinner and maybe they wouldn't, there might be truck drivers or cattle buyers or mechanics on hand. And so it helped my grandmother to cope with all this by me fitting in at the table wherever there was a place left, after everybody else got sat. I didn't mind—I'd been to college, I knew what the word "peripatetic" meant. And I found it kind of interesting, to have so many different places at that table—to be switched around at random that way. Wondering before each meal, which would be my place?

Then I was twenty-two, home from Northwestern University with my master's degree in journalism, with about a month to spend before going into six months' active duty in the Air Force. My folks were still working at that ranch, so there I lit once again, and this time there was a field of oats to bind. I was given the job of sitting on the binder and tripping a lever to make the bundles fall in a decent row—the rancher himself was driving the tractor pulling the binder. And at one of the first meal times, somebody said to me, "Well, you're doing pretty good on the binder with that master's degree of yours. Maybe if you go get a Ph.D., you can get to drive the tractor." At the time, I laughed with everybody else. (And none of us even knew that someday I'd be over here getting a degree we'd never *heard* of.) But I know now what was happening, in those meal times at that ranch, with the constant question—which place is mine? I *did* get a Ph.D.—but I did *not* go back and ask to drive that tractor. Those places among the hired hands at that table—none of them were mine, or ever going to be, if I could possibly find any way to be on my own in life.

Now to the third and last sense of place I'm aware of in myself, the one that has been making itself known to me ever since I sat down, more than ten years ago, to write something I called my Montana book, which turned out to be *This House of Sky*.

Trying to place it. To place it, first in the sense of identifying—as my dictionary helps out here, "to recollect clearly the circumstances or context of." As

in the phrase, one that I myself have to resort to often, "I remember your face but I can't place you."

That's the first side, of trying to place it. And then the next, trying to place it in the sense of putting something into place. Setting. Arranging. Making it be where it ought to be.

This is the carpentry part of writing. Building a book the reader will want to live in. Hammering together a solid basic structure, then taking care with the finishing-work, making sure you've got the details right.

Time and again in the past couple of years, as I've worked to create a fictional ranching valley called English Creek, up in the Two Medicine country, I've sat at my typewriter trying "to recollect clearly the circumstances of" portions of my Montana past. Some comes easily enough. I haven't been around sheep full-time for twenty-five years and yet when I start to write about how sheep ranching was, I know at once—who can ever forget?—what a sheep rancher's mood was, late in lambing, when his feet were aching from all those weeks of living in overshoes.

my
But memory is not always enough. In fact, pretty damn seldom is your own memory enough when you're trying to write accurately. I make it a habit to try to check details with people who know more than I do. Two quick examples, again from the carpentry on this English Creek novel. In my own Montana life, I have definitely eaten cake at a Fourth of July picnic, and on other occasions I definitely have had to skin dead sheep. Yet in writing this novel which takes place about the time I was born, I found I had no idea what kind of a cake that might be at a Fourth of July picnic in that part of Montana, back then; and I wasn't dead-sure about the sheep-skinning any more, either. So I wrote to one friend, a ranch wife now living in Great Falls, whom I knew would have been a teenager in the late 1930s and asked her what kind of cake her mother brought to the Fourth of July picnic—and I wrote to another friend, Horace Morgan, who's been a sheep rancher out here by Maudlow, and asked him to give me step-by-step directions for skinning a sheep. The cake turned out to be a chocolate sour cream one, and the details of sheep skinning, you don't want to hear about this soon after supper.

In the arranging that goes on in the writing of a book—the process of trying to put things into place, make them be where they ought to be—I think a writer's main tool is his eyesight. At least I've always found it a good idea when I'm attempting to write about something to do with the American West, to go out and take a look at it. For my novel Of a couple of years ago, *The Sea Runners*, the story of a long water journey from Alaska to the Columbia River, I bummed a ride down as much of that coast as I could, aboard the University of Alaska oceanography ship. The captain let me stand beside him in the wheelhouse—right under the big red sign that said "Crew members only allowed in the wheelhouse"—and from an hour before dawn until after dark, from Juneau to Seattle, day after day I stood and looked at that coast and water, and made notes about it.

For this Montana novel, Carol and I have been back here the past three sum-

mers. Part of that research has been to wander around various towns and choose buildings for my fictional place of Gros Ventre—Carol taking photos for me while I made notes about our home-made town. Gros Ventre, Montana, as we've created it, has the mercantile store from Augusta, the creamery from Conrad, the library from Lewistown, a bar from Choteau, and so on.

↑ So those are a few of the notions that come to mind in me, when "a sense of place" is mentioned. Not just geography, unmatched as so much of the Montana landscape is. But "place" as something to work from, and work on, and work toward. In a ~~forthcoming manuscript I've just read~~, a book called *Sky People* by a north-of-Spokane writer named Jack Nisbet, there is a story about one of his neighbors, a wiry rancher in years-old blue jeans, sitting around the kitchen with his hat on, drinking coffee, and the rancher says something like, "I haven't been all that many places. But I've seen things where I've been." Do I even need to add, that rancher was a Montanan?



Prairie America

By IVAN DOIG

*These are the gardens
of the Desert, these
The unshorn fields,
boundless and beautiful,
For which the speech of
England has no name—
The Prairies.
William Cullen Bryant*

PHOTOS BY NEBRASKA GAME COMMISSION

ONE DUSK I squinted across the land where I was growing up and saw that the prairie is really a seascape.

The wind was blowing, as it did day and night that summer, and the moving waves of rich-yellow wheat could be seen in the settling dark.

A combine cruised on the far side of the field. I had never been within a thousand miles of an ocean, but I knew that the combine, with its running lights just flicked on, was a freighter bound through the night for Sydney.

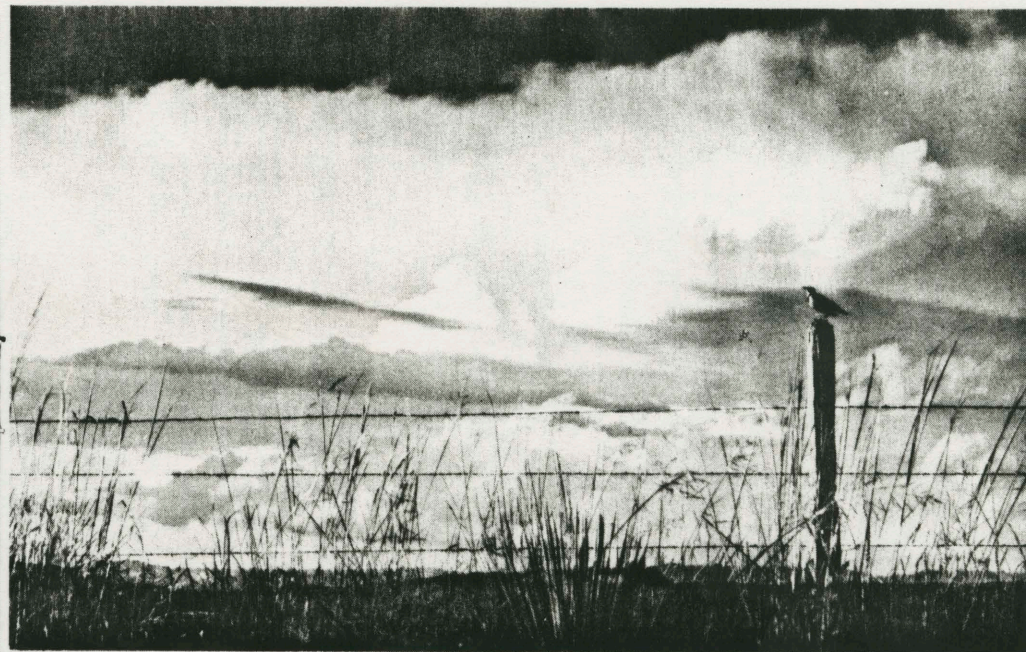
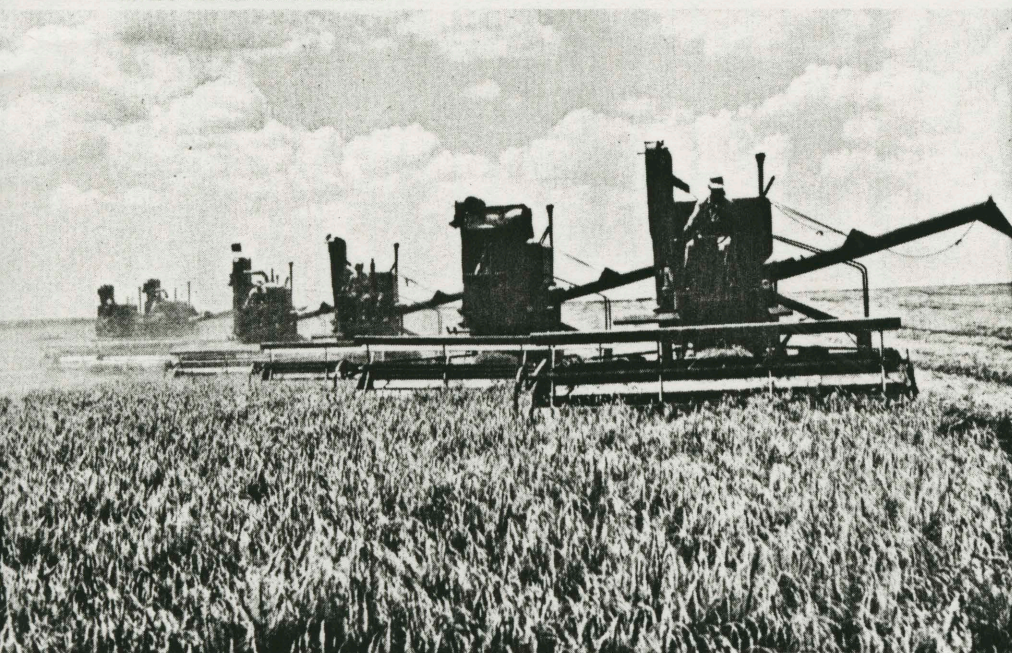
Bench hills rose to the north, surely a fair coastline. The expanse of it all, hills and fields and wind in the wheat, ran out far beyond—oceanic—to where the sky and the flat horizon fitted together.

I was 15, and I had found a sea for myself.

Settlers who migrated onto the Great Plains more than a century ago also must have seen the American prairie as an ocean of land. They traveled across it in convoys, and their wagons, groaning westward, came to be called prairie schooners.

The image of the seascape, however, tells only partial truth. The prairie also is soil and grass and long rivers, and from the remembered heft of stones I wrestled from fields sown to spring wheat, I know it has its share of rock.

Thinkers trying to fix on what is truly American about America pause for real thought about the Great Plains. The vast prairie was—and is—the highway between the coastal ends of the





nation. But it also was—and is—farm country where families settled to stay.

It's rural, with a strong literary tradition; small-townish and insular, with a history of imaginative politics.

A splendid mountain wall sheers up at the western end of the Great Plains. But if the Rocky Mountains mark its end, where does prairie America begin?

At the Mississippi River? At Independence, Missouri, where the wagon trains pushed off?

Or is it, as historian Walter Prescott Webb argued, at roughly the 98th meridian, that imaginary line from middle Texas to the eastern edge of the Dakotas, where newcomers found that the annual rainfall measured less than eastward, the forest vanished, and "the ways of life and of living changed"?

Prairie America is hard to pin down in other ways too. From the levelness of Kansas, Nebraska, and the twin Dakotas, the interior plain actually makes a long, gradual tilt. Only 800 feet above sea level near Kansas City, the prairie climbs to an altitude of one mile at Denver, the hem of the Rockies.

Prairie life once was horizontal, in the strictest sense. The plains belonged

to the buffalo. Great dark herds eddied across the land, a powerful moving horizon just below the fixed horizon of earth and sky joining. High grass rippled with wind, all movement down close to the lie of the land.

Then the more upright figures appeared. Man on foot, not much to mar the horizon. Spanish explorers on proud steeds, their outlines tilting up into the sky. Indians on horseback. Cowboys. Cavalry. Wagon trains, canvas-gray against the prairie like a gathering of caravels. Sod houses, unmoving interruptions in the flat surface. Trains, iron profiles amid grass. Steamboats, gingerbread palaces puffing upstream.

Now, prairie America is marked almost as much by vertical lines against the sky as by its original flow of horizon. There are skyscrapers on those plains—grain elevators which announce the small towns of middle America.

Grain elevators. The mention returns me to that wheat country seascape, for those elevators are the ports of that inland region. During hauling season, grain trucks wait in burly lines to dump their golden cargoes through the grilled floor inside each elevator.

Waiting, you can swap small talk with drivers from 50 miles around. Or you can read a small paperback library, as I did, one tail end of a long, hot summer.

Looking back on prairie living, I find myself asking with flatland author Wallace Stegner: "Why, short of exile, would anyone ever submit to the vast geometry of sky and earth, to the glare and heat, to the withering winds?"

And then I echo Stegner's answer: "But how else could he have met the mystery of nights when the stars were scoured clean and the prairie was full of breathings from a long way off, and the strange, friendly barking of night-hunting owls?" ♦

THE SOPHISTICATED TRAVELER

THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE/PART 2/MARCH 13, 1988

AT HOME WITH LASSIE AND HER ILK

By Ivan Doig

Author of "Dancing at the Rascal Fair"

They run daylong, the competitors from Jedburgh and Craigielands and Potburn and Mayshiels and threescore other Scottish map dots. Late and just now unlost — we nearly haven't come at all, what with the wee directions provided in the Edinburgh newspaper's notice of this event and then one of those travel-weary "Should we or shouldn't we?" colloquies about the uncertainties of aiming a rented car and our mortal selves down the left side of the road into the back lanes of the Pentland Hills — my wife, Carol, and I arrive as the entrant from Shoestanes Farm is gliding around the green course, a sleek speck in pursuit of four larger specks.

I stand stock still and watch. The silky movements of that trailing figure, splendid in the grass; the canny doggedness as he scrupulously paces himself until, with a last flourish, he takes command of his charges.

"Lassiehund," the German tourist next to us explains to his small son as he points to the panting pride of Shoestanes Farm.

Well, yes and nein. The border collies in competition at the Edinburgh Open Sheep Dog Trials are smaller, about knee-high to a person, and distinctly less cinematic than Lassie in nose and mien. At least as brainy, though. Consider the trial they are expected to perform. When four sheep are released several hundred yards up the field, the dog whose turn it is sets off on a long, enveloping dash — a maneuver that, during the sheep drives into the Montana high country of my boyhood, we called "way 'round 'em, Shep!" Then, in response to signals from his distant handler and by dint of his own combination of shadowing and creeping and outfoxing, the dog must herd the mercurial quartet of sheep past or through a series of obstacles until ultimately finessing them into a tiny pen.

In miniature, then, a sheep dog trial replicates the timeless ritual perhaps first performed by Abel, that biblical keeper of sheep, with a first wise dog at his side: the seasonal movement of livestock to fresh pasture. "Transhumance" is the technical word for such a rhythmic journey of replenishment, from the Latin for "across" and "earth."



There in picture book countryside, where one kept expecting James Herriot to pop over a hill with a lamb in his arms, dog after dog had his day. And watching them intently perform their bred-in-the-bone task, across the earth from the Montana sheep ranches of thirty years ago, I felt something surely akin to transhumance's rhythm of renewal. I believe the word for mine is "travel."



lighter place: a skirt in stained-glass colors,
t the young Byron might have worn.
de.

G. Hook Woman." an informative brochure.



485 Seventh Avenue • New York • 10018

AVELER

MAGIC MOUNTAINS

Continued from Page 8

olives, vineyards and wheat; others frescoes, neatly arranged by a Renaissance painter, of cypresses, towers and castles. But these are not the mountains that flash through my mind at the mention of the word. "My" mountains will always be the great wedges of granite that rear up, like monolithic sharks' teeth, across the valley from the town in southern Italy where, long ago, I lived. They were known locally as "Our Dolomites" and mentioned with apologetic pride: we had nothing truly unique to offer. The town was like that too. We claimed endearing qualities for it, yet we knew what others, those few who ever passed through, thought: it was bare, isolated, backward. Even our Norman tower was not quite what it ought to be because it was attached to the vast mosaic of stone huts and hovels that was the town. Still, we had Our Dolomites.

I was very young and alone and as isolated from the other inhabitants as the town was from all that was modern Italy. I was a foreigner, an anomaly, a woman unattached, yet one with some power (I represented a British social agency) or so it was thought. Decisions about the simplest things — to go to a cafe, to buy from this grocer rather than that one — had to be right the first time. I could never be seen to hesitate or doubt the wisdom of my own acts. But of course I did, turning myself into a stupor of loneliness. Then I would drive out just beyond the town, pull the car off the road and watch Our Dolomites. As the light changed, the sun, setting, reddened them; or clouds strutted by, shading them in jagged gloom; or veils of mist slipped in and out among the ridges, exploring. They never failed me. The fact that they were and always had been, that they had survived, always changing, brought elusive peace. I could go home to wrestle again, alone, with those decisions, and I could try again to treat fairly with people who claimed so much more from me than I could give.

A great many years have passed, but I still feel that these mountains somehow taught me to be alone — yet never lonely. When I am there now, I always stop for a moment, and I always

remember the town gossips who, each time I went to see Our Dolomites, reported faithfully that I had met my "amante." Some unlucky traveling salesman, no doubt.

Closing in on The Rockies

By Ivan Doig

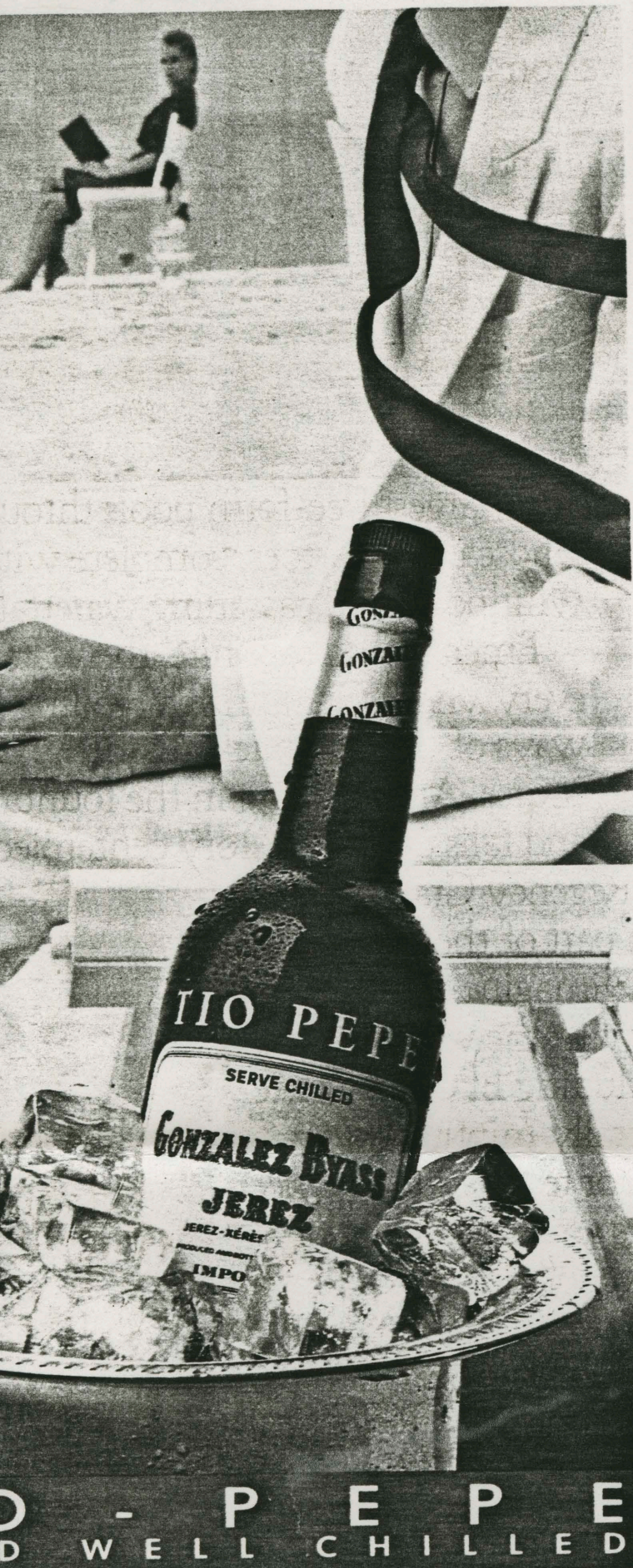
AUTHOR OF "ENGLISH CREEK"
(ATHENEUM)

Some summers I watched the neighboring family of mountains from first light to last. Although they loomed near enough that I could feel their breath, the wind, I had never been in their midst, and only our locally prominent ones did I know by name: Walling Reef, Heart Butte, Split Mountain. The rest of the northern Montana Rockies, above the grainfields where I was a teen-age tractor driver, were an anonymous wild clan — a temperamental skyline where a hundred summits sat and shared the sun one moment, veiled themselves from one another in rain squalls the next. Outsider though I was, the reliably unpredictable behavior of that mountain throng fascinated me. Someday, I promised myself, I would go up there among them.

At the end of one of those summers I glanced away from the mountains toward college and career, and when I looked again I was 20 years older, although the mountains didn't seem to be. Someday had arrived, and was already departing, as my wife, Carol, and I climbed the trail out of my remembered mountains on the Fourth of July, 1977. Our backpack trip into the Bob Marshall Wilderness had been gloriously solitary: only sun, frost, wind, wildflowers and us. We had dined on trout caught in Strawberry Creek. We had not been dined on by grizzlies. Now, after four hiking days and 30 miles at the knees and in the laps of the mountains, we abruptly were riding on a shoulder. Behind us, below us, lay the Continental Divide. Ahead, our exit — a colossal bowl of steep rock-and-timber slopes, and beyond, through a cracklike notch, the northern Montana plains, patterned into the chocolate and gold of strip farming. Suddenly I recog-

(Continued on Page 14)

What Europeans
To When They're
ored With White
Wine.

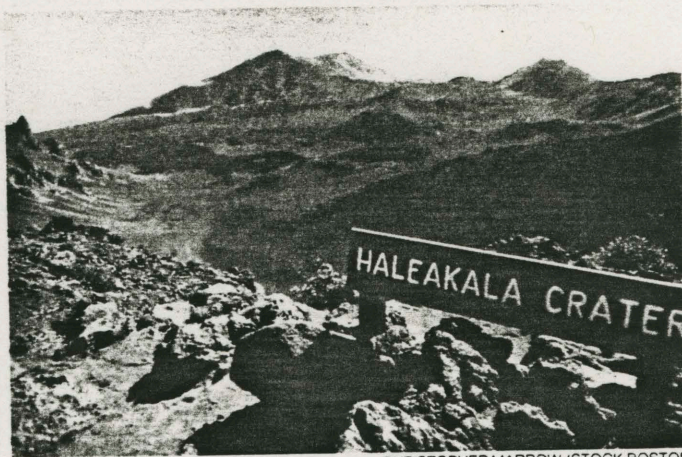


at has swept the continent. Icy cold Tio Pepe.
ld dry alternative to mere white wine.

© 1985. Imported by "21" Brands, Inc., N.Y., N.Y.
RAVELER

MAGIC MOUNTAINS

Continued from Page 12



CHRISTOPHER MARROW/STOCK BOSTON

At the edge of the House of the Sun.

nized the exact peak we were on. Hadn't I gazed at it for entire summers from those fields? A squall came, dived on us, scurried us into the shelter of jack pines. As we waited out the weather tantrum, I inspected our map for the name of this familiar mountain to add to all the others — Bighorn Mountain, Cap Mountain, Crooked Mountain, Bum Shot Mountain — I had been memorizing as I encountered them. This final member of the clan was called simply, rightly, Family Peak.

House of the Hawaiian Sun

By Fletcher Knebel
AUTHOR OF "POKER GAME"
(DOUBLEDAY)

It's a friendly mountain, lending its long, smooth flanks to towns, farms and ranches as it sweeps down to the sea, yet it has commanding dignity, a kind of noble presence and, for its intimates, a resonant tranquility and sense of magic.

It bears the name Haleakala (House of the Sun), and it dominates the eastern half of the island of Maui in the Hawaiian chain. Although its summit stands only 10,032 feet above sea level, not lofty by the standards of the fierce storm-lashed peaks of the Himalayas or Andes, this island mountain has rare power to touch souls and imprint memories.

It is the inner Haleakala — a vast crater with pink and mauve cinder cones, drifting clouds, fields of yellow primroses, the shining silversword plant (unique to this island), wild goats, the flashing crimson iiwi bird and endless har-

monies of silence — that offers a spiritual experience to those who come to visit or commune with this dormant volcano.

Tens of thousands of tourists have driven to the summit in early morning and watched in awe as the sun rose over the eastern rim of a crater that could hold all of Manhattan comfortably. But to feel Haleakala's magic, one must descend by foot or horse 3,000 feet to the floor of the crater, which was formed by volcanic upheavals centuries ago. Unlike the active lava founts of Mauna Loa and Kilauea on the neighboring island of Hawaii, Haleakala has not erupted since about 1790.

The mountain poses no challenge to hardy climbers: no walls to scale; no need to hammer pitons; no crevices to tumble into; no avalanches to bury the unwary. One can drive to the summit, then hike down into the crater and prowl a moonscape that suddenly blooms with patches of white clover, tarweed or mountain pilo. In fact, one can contrive to spend several days in the crater without ever trudging uphill. Instead, the hiker can exit via Kaupo Gap on a long downward trail that ends a few miles from the drowsy, flower-scented town of Hana.

Magic dwells in this great bowl in the sky, holy ground to the ancient Hawaiians and "the sublimist spectacle" to Mark Twain, who rolled boulders down its sides 120 years ago. Some hikers return year after year, never tiring of the crater's spell, woven of the silences, the wildflowers, the jagged walls, the sudden mists and the far pastel vistas.

Twilight, with its lavender
(Continued on Page 79)

The Eye of Time

Of the three of us, it was my grandmother who preserved the photographs, as automatically diligent as if she were canning garden vegetables to carry us through the white worst months of winter. The albums even had their own sort of cellar: the dark and dust beneath the bed my father and I shared. *Gee gosh, someday*—the announcement always meant under-the-bed diving was being done, she was retrieving one or another album in which to put this year's school picture of me as a startlingly pompadoured sixth-grader or one of my father in unbuckled overshoes beside his latest obstetrical miracle, triplet purebred Hereford calves, or of Grandma herself posed beside the Jeep with her beloved but fidgety sheepdogs, Spot and Tip, ambivalently atop the hood. A photo is its own moment, blind to the future. In those Montana years none of us had so much as a hint that the albums would be the main witnesses to Bessie Ringer and Charlie Doig and myself as I worked at the writing of *This House of Sky*, and that the *someday* when the four black-paged collections would have a handier existence on an actual reachable shelf is only now, in my house in a Seattle suburban valley.

What dumfounds me whenever I bring out this photographic poundage is that during the fifteen years my father and my mother's mother and I were a family, we didn't own a camera. The evidence of our existence does thin out dangerously during the middle of that period—not a single photo dating from the three years we spent on a bleak leased ranch south of Dupuyer; testimony unto itself, perhaps, about that woebegone damn place—but just often enough, somebody snapped a shot and thought to provide us a print.

It is the time before, the black-and-white era when my mother was alive, that the camera eye steadily took in Doig and Ringer family life. Two of the four albums were my mother's, her handwriting across the top of many of the photos. Blessed I am that she shared my habit of scribbling annotation. To me, the effective writing in this 1928 scene from *This House of Sky* is not mine but hers:

"It was the Fourth of July celebration in White Sulphur Springs, and they took the town. . . . That holiday's snapshots show up in a happy flurry; every scene has been braided to its moment by her looping writing. *Ready for the Big Day*: Dad and his brother

Angus have doffed their black ten-gallon hats for the camera, grins in place under their slicked hair, and bandannas fluttering at their necks like flags of a new country. *The Wildest Bunch in W. S. S.*— seven of them from Ringling and the Basin are ganged along the side of a car, handrolled cigarettes angling out of the men's mouths, my mother and her cousin small prim fluffs in the dark cloudbank of cowboy hats. . . . There is another photo taken soon afterward, in which my father grins cockily, hands palmed into hip pockets, dressy new chaps sweeping back from his legs as if he were flying. On this one is written: *My Cowboy.*"

My mother is frequent in the companion album, too, the one evidently begun by my father when he still lived off and on at the Doig homestead in the mountains above the Sixteen Canyon. Its pictorial record ranges from the Pacific Coast—Dad and Clifford Shearer, dubiously atop shoreline boulders the sopping winter they spent piling lumber in Aberdeen, Washington—to the Moss Agate ranch near Ringling where my father courted my mother. Small mysteries ask themselves whenever I go through these age-tanned shots. My father in cowboy hat and boots and with jeans rolled to four-inch cuffs sits on the front step of the log homestead house with his brother Claude and their riding buddy, Charlie Smith: what is the book Dad holds open in his hands, and why? Nine horsebackers are thundering pell-mell through the railroad village of Sixteen; one mount is being ridden double,

a colt trails another, a fearless dog is racing amid the hooves, there is a boy in bib pants running a crowding second to the lead rider, who seems to be wearing a white sailor cap. What event can this be? Which ram-pager is my book-toting father of a few pages earlier? Who of those homesteaders of the Sixteen country was skilled enough with a camera of the time to capture this cascade of motion without blur?

The large final album, my grandmother's, opens to a surprising sequence: my mother and father in pose after pose in front of tepee or tent. This time it is my father's words, spoken, which carry this part of their past into *This House of Sky*: "*The first summer there on Grassy, we moved camp fifty-eight times in the first sixty days. We had a brand new box camera we were awful proud of, and we'd take a picture of our campsite every time.*" Fifteen of those sheepcamp sites survive on the front and back of a single album page, one or the other of my parents in front of canvas walls while the other clicks the shutter, and elsewhere in my inherited collection is the tantalizing shot of this bunch: both of my parents together, there on Grass Mountain that first summer of their marriage—it cannot be half a century ago, yet it is—the best picture ever taken of the two of them. By whom? Their camptender from the Dogie ranch? Johnny Gruar, the association rider on the mountain pasture adjoining theirs? My grandmother, one of the times she rode horseback the twenty miles from Moss Agate to visit?

The sum of the albums and their overflow is, by rapid count, about five hundred photos. The pictures go back as far as they can: a baby portrait of my grandmother, born in 1893. Then one of her holding my mother at the age of perhaps six months, in 1913. In my father's earliest, he is in his late teens—1916, '17, '18?—standing atop the woodpile with four of his brothers and his sister, Doigs nearly as plentiful as the firewood under them. My own appearance into all this seems to reveal me from the very start as a straddler of generations—at age three in 1942, riding a tricycle in one shot and a horse in the next. As ravishing a cast of characters as we are, though, edges and backdrops are what capture my memory. Old truths stand stark in lens light. That the rusty metal sheeting which covered the shed beside our house in Ringling made it the sorriest-looking structure in town, which is saying a lot. That Wall Mountain, its long cusp of stone on the horizon above the Doig homestead, still is as striking as any land form I have seen in the west of America. That around the log-and-chink homestead house amid sagebrush and shale, my Scottish grandparents put up a picket fence.

And it is a fortunate sum, for when I set out to write *This House of Sky* I found that photographs were the only consistent documentation there was of us. I possessed a few hours each of tape-recorded talk with my father and grandmother, but as to linear evidence of the course of our three lives, we inadvertently had

covered our tracks. When Grandma made a periodic attack on the muss of our household, letters were fed to the stove. Dad's dealings when he ran sheep on shares or contracted to put up hay usually were based on a handshake. I am the family's sole diarist (it perhaps takes three generations to make one) and I began at it only ten years ago, my father already passed from us by then. So it was more vital than I knew, that evening a year or so before her own death in 1974, when my grandmother and I put the labels on her photographic preserves. As told in *This House of Sky*: "Picture upon picture of my father and mother . . . brought sniffles or hard-swallowed sentences from Grandma, and by the time I had jotted my notes on the final page, the emotion she had been putting into the room had worn me out. *That should be enough for tonight*, I said in a weary glaze. She turned to me in surprise: *But we got these others to get through. Hadn't we just as well keep on?* And we did."

The camera continues to tell me much of what I need to know to write. When Carol and I were married in 1965, with her came the dowry of her elderly Argus C44. It had wandered Europe with her—undoubtedly sharpening the respect with which Grandma and Dad and I peered into its lens as Christmases were clicked into commemoration—and suddenly our pictured selves were bright with color. The Argus studied my home areas of Montana for me for *This House of Sky*; the Olympic Peninsula of Washington for *Winter*

Brothers; and for *The Sea Runners*, southeast Alaska and the Queen Charlotte Islands, where it caught a fatal dose of rain. Currently Carol wields a Pentax, as full of exposure lights as a traffic signal and with range-finding lines and arcs that would outfit a bombsight. The novel I am writing now needs a Montana town of the 1930's, and my wife and her pluperfect Pentax are its builders: houses from Fort Benton, Augusta's old square-front merc, a Choteau haberdashery, the creamery in Conrad. The town needs a setting, and she and her lens pal collect the mountains and benchlands and creeks and coulees for my version of the Two Medicine country. Evidently we made more than one marriage at that ceremony eighteen years ago—the two of us, and typewriter ribbon and film.

There is one further angle of the camera in my life and work, and it is the unexpected veer of the lens toward me. Since the publication of *This House of Sky* I every so often will open pages into a book review or interview and find myself gazing at myself. The unlikelyst possible substitute for my words, yet evidently a fee that must be paid to the camera for all its previous help to me—my face for the world to see. Lately, with something between bemusement and alarm I notice that this bearded mug which is me keeps getting grayer and Scotcher. Yet why not. All said and done, a photograph is a knowing wink from the eye of time.

Now arrives the latest in *This House of Sky's* lineage of albums: Duncan Kelso's picturing of the country of

my book. The land of the homestead near Sixteen is herein, and Grass Mountain, where my parents began their married life with that sheepherding summer, and the Castle Mountains my grandmother lived in sight of during so much of her Montana ranch life; Duncan Kelso worked his feet as well as his shutter finger. Nor did he neglect either of the tiny communities which have been metropolises of the imagination to me, Ringling and Dupuyer; nor the fencelines where hawks sit sentinel and the wind tries barbwire for a harp; nor the magical Stockmen Bar in White Sulphur Springs, where Pête McCabe presided perfectly behind the bar and The Weavers on the jukebox wished Irene the greatest good night there ever was or will be. The best praise I can give Duncan is that his photographs have something of the same effect on me as those within my family's quartet of albums: I not only see his pictures, I begin to hear them.

Ivan Doig
Seattle, March 1983

Backpacking

A matchless wilderness for trail veterans

By Ivan Doig

BOB MARSHALL would have loved his namesake neighborhood atop the Rocky Mountains.

As father of the United States Forest Service system of wilderness areas and a founder of the Wilderness Society, Marshall was an unequaled outdoors enthusiast. Fittingly, the Bob Marshall Wilderness of northern Montana is matchless in its own right — nearly a million acres of rampart peaks, alpine meadows, crystal streams, and isolation from civilization.

In early summer, my wife and I backpacked for five days through the northernmost thrust of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. On our 40-mile loop route, we did not see another human being. What we did see was a landscape of unforgettably brawny grandeur — and, as Bob Marshall would have known, some limits of our own capacities.

That is to say, the Bob Marshall Wilderness is not for the novice backpacker. A suggested guideline: You may be ready to try the Marshall if you have had three-to-four years of outdoors experience and have spent at least a week at a time in some of America's premier high country, such as the California Sierras or along the Pacific Crest Trail of the Pacific Northwest.

OTHERWISE, THE Marshall Wilderness is best sampled in the capable company of commercial outfitters and guides. They are plentiful enough; a list of those that are state-licensed is available from the Montana Fish and Game Commission, Helena, Mont. 59601.

Whether you do it afoot or on horseback, choose your area of the wilderness with forethought — do you want primarily to fish, see big game, explore mountain trails? — and with the advice of National Forest personnel.

(The Bob Marshall Wilderness lies across two national forests: in its eastern portion, the Lewis and Clark National Forest, with headquarters in the Federal Building, Great Falls, Mont. 59401; in the western, the Flathead National Forest, 290 N. Main, Kalispell, Mont. 59901.)

Because I had lived on a ranch nearby and come to know old-timers there who know the mountains, we chose the little-used northeasternmost route into the Marshall Wilderness — starting from Swift Reservoir, 20 gravelly miles west of the tiny town of Dupuer. On July 1, in we plunged, with the Rockies thrusting and tumbling ahead of us, our packs snugged high on our backs.

Day One: On the map, our route makes an abrupt, pincerlike reach into the top of the Marshall: in along the south fork of Birch Creek, squiggling west and north along Gateway and Strawberry creeks, then out along the north fork of the Birch Creek to Swift Reservoir again.

On the actual terrain, the trail slowly threads us along beneath mammoth rock-crusted mountainsides — so streaked and whorled with reefs and concavities that they seem like an ocean bottom tipped empty and left propped on its side. Gradually we begin to adjust to the distances yawning away all around us — just us.

Promptly at lunchtime, we come to the first of the day's three fordings of the fast-running south fork. We note that the flow is about kneedeep, boulder-bottomed, and perhaps uncrossable this early in the summer but for the several months'



Photo/Ivan Doig

A signpost marks the trail crossing along the south fork of the Birch Creek route in the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

drought in this region of the Rockies.

Readying our opposite fording styles — Carol simply sloshes in, I go it barefoot for the sake of my fragile boots — we start across. Just then, a four-point deer appears a hundred yards upstream and eyes us in surprise before vanishing in three bounds.

The buck is merely one of the trail's bonuses. The mountainscape all around proves more open and sweeping than we had anticipated, the south fork more dramatic in its clear swiftness. And after 10 miles, enough for the day, we find a fetching creekside campsite where autumn hunting parties have done their overnights.

Day Two: It is four miles to the Continental Divide at Gateway Pass, and every inch of it in a ripping, head-on wind.

Up the long meadowy incline toward the pass, gusts come strong enough to stagger us, yet the day is warm enough for shirtsleeves.

After the trudge up, Gateway Pass and the divide prove to be an easygoing surprise, a mild cleft between square-cut mountains. Quickly we are across — now in the Marshall Wilderness proper — and into a bowl of grassy upland called Big River Meadows.

There we lunch, and study a collapsing log cabin once used by a hunting guide I knew. He had tales of the furies of these mountains, and the morning's wind made me respect them anew.

In the afternoon, we creep our way through Gateway Gorge, a Yosemite-like pair of rock domes hovering over us on either side. Here the wind's buffeting gets a bit more serious: The trail ribbons thinly across a slide area of talus, with a drop of a couple of hundred feet on our left.

Reminding one another to hug the inside of the slope, we inch across and into the haven of timber once more.

This night, after another 10-mile day, we camp on Strawberry Creek, just north of its juncture

with Gateway Creek. Someone has erected a large canvas teepee as a fishing camp and we put up our tiny tent nearby. With daylight left, I unlimber my fishing pole and catch two cutthroat trout for supper.

Day Three: Peeking from the depths of our sleeping bag, I discover frost on the outside of the tent.

Carol pokes a finger to the roof. "Nope, it's on the inside."

I bring a fire to life, Carol makes a breakfast of hot soup and hot chocolate, and soon both we and the day are warming.

This is a fishing day, and my luck is running: a catch of eight nice trout, and the two best casts of my sporadic angling career.

Safety tips for backpackers

HERE ARE A few guidelines to keep you within the margins of safety while backpacking.

The basic rules of backpacking in high country, such as the Bob Marshall Wilderness, are two: Know your capabilities, and don't go beyond them. Back-track to safety whenever weather, ailment, bears, or any other peril seems to warrant it.

In your backpack, carry such emergency supplies as a first-aid kit, some fast-energy food, and desperation items such as a pocket-size rescue blanket, waterproof container of matches, and candles or fire-

starting tablets for use in damp weather. Also, take a couple of days' extra rations.

Mountain weather can turn freezing in minutes. Take warm clothing — wool still is a favorite for retaining warmth even when wet — and rain gear.

Pay attention to your feet. Hiking boots and socks should be snugly comfortable, but not tight; at the first sign of blisters, pad them with moleskin or adhesive foam. Never start a hike in boots that aren't broken in.

Carry a compass, and know how to use it. And outfit yourself

Carol, meanwhile, read, relaxed, took pictures, and at one point banged tin cups together when she heard a crashing in the woods. The crashing stopped immediately, but reminded us that we are in bear country. The nearby teepee offers positive proof: its sides are splashed with muddy paw prints and show rips where some stray bruin finally clawed in.

We have been taking bear precautions throughout the trip. We watch along the trail, tie cups on our pack frames to make a warning clatter as we hike, keep a garbage-free camp, and rope the food backpack high out of reach each night.

Day Four: The frost is thicker and whiter this morning, and with our tent sopping from it inside and out, we decide to pack and make an early start on the trail.

The day unfolds into our most rugged. North along Strawberry Creek, the forest begins to pitch into abrupt little gulleys. The clay-faced trail is baked as hard as concrete, and despite every precaution, I develop a severely blistered toe.

By noon, we have recrossed the Continental Divide through another gentle notch, Badger Pass, but now climb steeply and steadily for a full hour to go over a knife-edge ridge of Family Peak.

At the crest, nearly 7,100 feet in elevation, we truly feel as if we are atop the roofline of the continent. Peaks of the interior Rockies jut and flow as far as we can see west and north and south, and to the east are more peaks and a notch view of the farm-patterned plains beyond.

Then a howling squall of rain and sleet hits along the ridge, and we dive for cover in trees and pull on wool jackets and rain gear. In 15 minutes it has swept past, and we start down the mountain face — the sheerest portion of the entire trail — to the north fork of Birch Creek.

At our campsite in a few miles, the weather finds us again. We shelter under trees and around our campfire until the persistent rain begins to filter through, then pitch our tent.

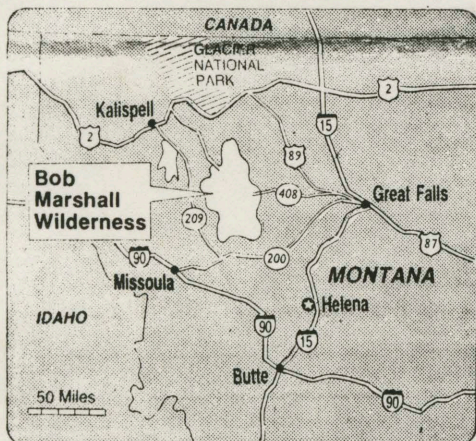
Day Five: The outbound day, usually a leisurely one that passes quickly.

We have some nine miles to go. I protect my blistered foot by encasing it in fresh moleskin and three pairs of socks, and it quits protesting. The wind has come up once more, but this time we have our backs to it, and we ease along the trail snug and smug.

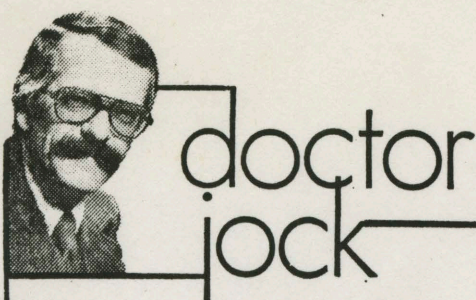
The north fork offers a picture-perfect fishing hole, a spot where the creek pours off a 3-foot ledge into a deep, shadow-dappled pool. For 20 minutes, I flick fishing line and lures into it, casting up, down, and sideways across every lambent blue precinct of the pool — and catch exactly nothing.

But if the fishing is slack, the scenery is not. As on our first leg of the trip, the valleys are expectedly colossal, the rock formations intriguingly inventive and formidable.

And then, soon after noon and a pair of farewell fordings of the creek, the blue-green of Swift Reservoir comes into sight. Across it, we can pick out the trail up the south fork, where we had set off into this classically commemorative country of the Bob Marshall Wilderness 5 days and 40 miles earlier.



Tribune Map



doctor
jock

By David Bachman, M.D.

Q—Can you suggest any remedy for altitude sickness? My 13-year-

jog daily and strive for 15 miles per week. I'm in an exercise class two

Greenview Winter

PRODUCTS OF THE LEONARD CHEMICAL CORPORATION

Greenview Winter

The Fall

Lawn experts agree, your lawn from fertilizing in Fall than at Winter Green® is specially formulated to keep it green into Winter. Winter



Prairie America

By IVAN DOIG

*These are the gardens
of the Desert, these
The unshorn fields,
boundless and beautiful,
For which the speech of
England has no name—
The Prairies.*

William Cullen Bryant

ONE DUSK I squinted across the land where I was growing up and saw that the prairie is really a seascape.

The wind was blowing, as it did day and night that summer, and the moving waves of rich-yellow wheat could be seen in the settling dark.

A combine cruised on the far side of the field. I had never been within a thousand miles of an ocean, but I knew that the combine, with its running lights just flicked on, was a freighter bound through the night for Sydney.

Bench hills rose to the north, surely a fair coastline. The expanse of it all, hills and fields and wind in the wheat, ran out far beyond—oceanic—to where the sky and the flat horizon fitted together.

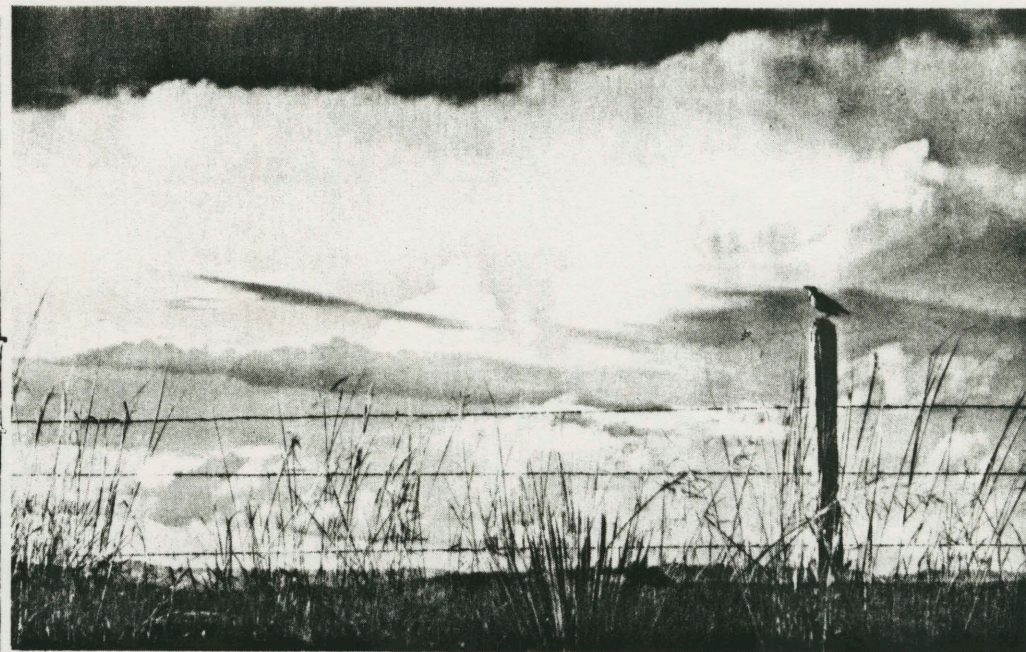
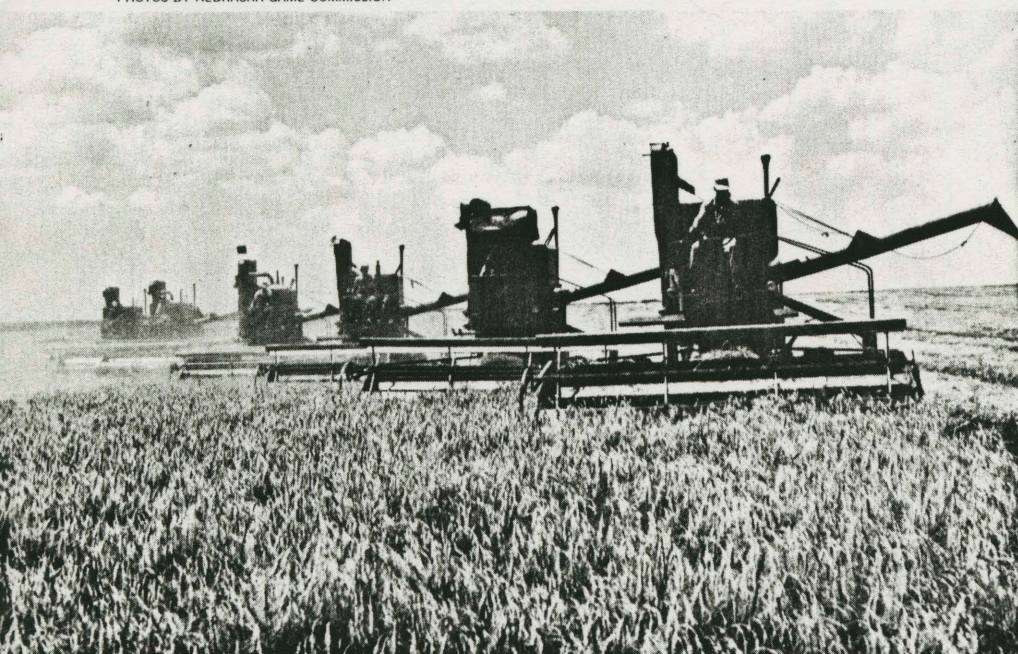
I was 15, and I had found a sea for myself.

Settlers who migrated onto the Great Plains more than a century ago also must have seen the American prairie as an ocean of land. They traveled across it in convoys, and their wagons, groaning westward, came to be called prairie schooners.

The image of the seascape, however, tells only partial truth. The prairie also is soil and grass and long rivers, and from the remembered heft of stones I wrestled from fields sown to spring wheat, I know it has its share of rock.

Thinkers trying to fix on what is truly American about America pause for real thought about the Great Plains. The vast prairie was—and is—the highway between the coastal ends of the

PHOTOS BY NEBRASKA GAME COMMISSION





nation. But it also was—and is—farm country where families settled to stay.

It's rural, with a strong literary tradition; small-townish and insular, with a history of imaginative politics.

A splendid mountain wall sheers up at the western end of the Great Plains. But if the Rocky Mountains mark its end, where does prairie America begin?

At the Mississippi River? At Independence, Missouri, where the wagon trains pushed off?

Or is it, as historian Walter Prescott Webb argued, at roughly the 98th meridian, that imaginary line from middle Texas to the eastern edge of the Dakotas, where newcomers found that the annual rainfall measured less than eastward, the forest vanished, and "the ways of life and of living changed"?

Prairie America is hard to pin down in other ways too. From the levelness of Kansas, Nebraska, and the twin Dakotas, the interior plain actually makes a long, gradual tilt. Only 800 feet above sea level near Kansas City, the prairie climbs to an altitude of one mile at Denver, the hem of the Rockies.

Prairie life once was horizontal, in the strictest sense. The plains belonged

to the buffalo. Great dark herds eddied across the land, a powerful moving horizon just below the fixed horizon of earth and sky joining. High grass rippled with wind, all movement down close to the lie of the land.

Then the more upright figures appeared. Man on foot, not much to mar the horizon. Spanish explorers on proud steeds, their outlines tilting up into the sky. Indians on horseback. Cowboys. Cavalry. Wagon trains, canvas-gray against the prairie like a gathering of caravels. Sod houses, unmoving interruptions in the flat surface. Trains, iron profiles amid grass. Steamboats, gingerbread palaces puffing upstream.

Now, prairie America is marked almost as much by vertical lines against the sky as by its original flow of horizon. There are skyscrapers on those plains—grain elevators which announce the small towns of middle America.

Grain elevators. The mention returns me to that wheat country seascape, for those elevators are the ports of that inland region. During hauling season, grain trucks wait in burly lines to dump their golden cargoes through the grilled floor inside each elevator.

Waiting, you can swap small talk with drivers from 50 miles around. Or you can read a small paperback library, as I did, one tail end of a long, hot summer.

Looking back on prairie living, I find myself asking with flatland author Wallace Stegner: "Why, short of exile, would anyone ever submit to the vast geometry of sky and earth, to the glare and heat, to the withering winds?"

And then I echo Stegner's answer: "But how else could he have met the mystery of nights when the stars were scoured clean and the prairie was full of breathings from a long way off, and the strange, friendly barking of night-hunting owls?" ♦