

MONTANA

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CROW CHIEF WITH PIPE AND DRUM—oil on canvas, by Joseph Henry Sharp, n.d.

MONTANA'S INSTRUCTION of me has never stopped. But there was a spell, not long after I got that shirty answer from J. Frank Dobie, when I became a problem pupil.¹

The fact is, I tried—tried as hard as I knew how—to detach myself from Montana.

The friction began there when, as my folks put it, I was “back east in Illinois” majoring in journalism at Northwestern University. My presence at Northwestern was our equivalent of a moon shot, a launching project which for four years took most of our family's resources and then some: a scholarship, the dishwashing job I held throughout my undergraduate years, and steady frugality by me in Evanston and my father and grandmother back in Montana.² The ever-remindful costs of my education told me I had to pay attention in those classrooms, and so, attention was paid. What I gradually found out, though, was that the deeper I got into college, the farther it was veering me from a future in Montana.

It is a price urban America has never really acknowledged that it owes to rural America. That country kids, schooled at great effort in the thin outlands of this nation, go on to become prime students at eminent universities and then take their diligence and ambition to the cities. When I was at Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism there were a number of us young workhorses from the West.³ I can't speak for the others, but in the instance of Ivan Doig, the more those skilled journalism professors taught me, the more they were fitting me for jobs my home country didn't hold.

Quite a while I struggled against that growing estrangement from Montana. It must have been my second or third summer vacation from college when, on the urging of one of those Medill savants, I wrote to the Associated Press in Helena and asked about the prospect of a summer job. The AP man wrote back that there wasn't much prospect, but he could talk to me if I happened to get to Helena. A long shot is at least a shot of some sort, so I borrowed the folks' car and one bright morning set off. The talk between the AP man and me had not progressed very far when, not harshly but apparently out of curiosity, he asked: “Don't you usually shave for a job interview?” Uh-oh. I managed to alibi that I'd gotten up early to make the drive to Helena and so, no, I had not taken the time to fire up the stove and lather and scrape myself.

I see now that the 100 per cent truth likely would have been more interesting to that newsman than my embarrassed version. For it was the summer pattern of our family that necessity made us water misers. The trio of summers of living with our sheep on the Blackfeet reservation, we'd had to haul all our water in a cream can, dipped carefully from one small roily spring; and even at my grandmother's house in Ringling, our supply was a neighbor's pump. In the face of all that, shaving was a once-or-so-a-week amenity, Dad and I generally using the same basin of water for it. It simply had slipped my mind that the rest of the world did not live that way. Anyway, the AP man shrugged at my more-or-less explanation and gave me sort of a typing test, at which I also did less than splendidly. He said he'd let me know if a way could be found to make use of me. But I haven't heard from him yet.

Except for that downy-cheeked episode, my prevailing notion throughout those summers home from college was that I owed my father and my grandmother some proximity, to make up for being 1,500 miles from them most of the rest of the year. A loyal theory but not a wise one. In those years and years of the three of us living together in a house trailer or a cookhouse or the cheesebox Ringling house, the one

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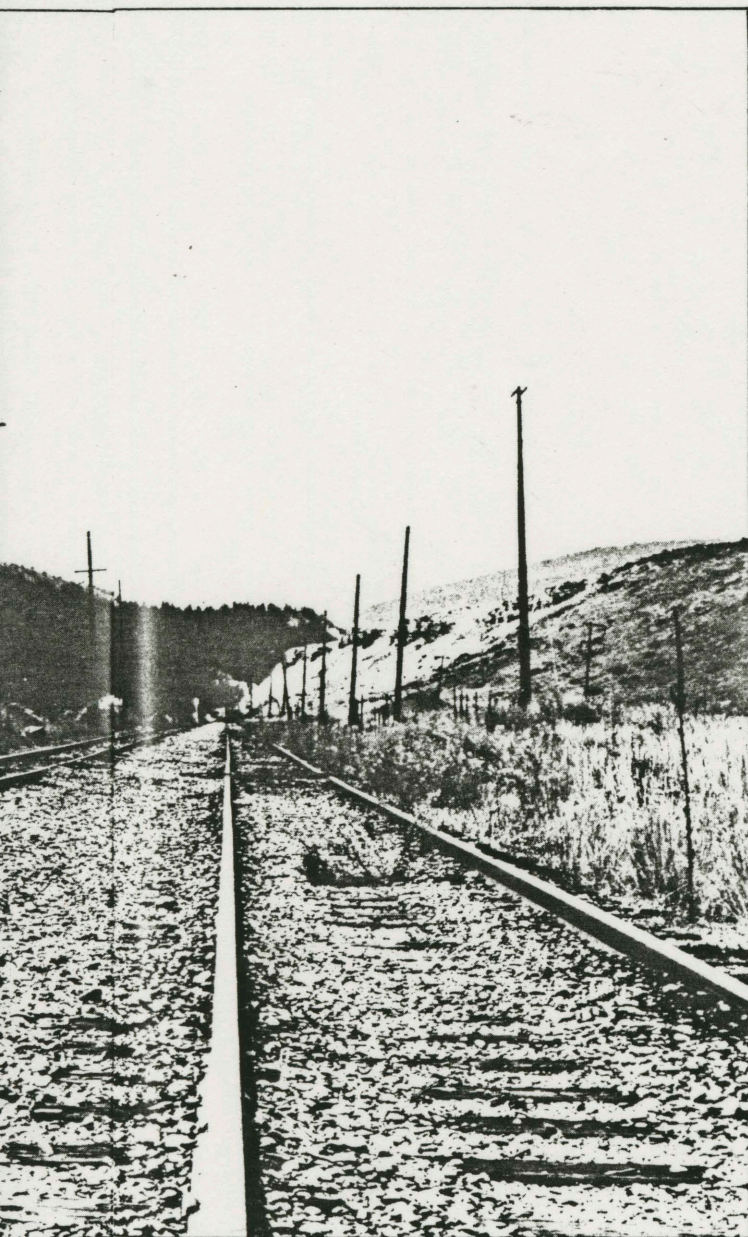
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You Can't Not Go Home Again

by Ivan Doig



by Duncan Kelso, from *Inside This House of Sky* (Atheneum, 1978)



BEGIN WITH a Montana story I know. It happens to be a *Montana* story as well, for it involves the learned publication you are holding at this moment.

Time: a quarter of a century ago.

Place: a college back east.

Scenario: a young man I knew something of, although not as much as I thought I did, was enrolled in a course in magazine journalism. Came the term paper assignment and everyone else embarked on evaluations of *Saturday Evening Post* and *Look* and *Holiday* and the like. But he, Montanan to the core, chose to write about *Montana the Magazine of Western History*.

Much night and sweat went into the letters he sent off to names on the *Montana* masthead, particularly to two among those listed as "Regional Editors": J. Frank Dobie of Texas and Montana's own A. B. Guthrie, Jr. Names of special lustre, even to a college sophomore, because they were blazoned on the covers of books; and so the effort that young man put into the Dobie-Guthrie set of questions would have budged a sheepshed.

Back from Dobie arrived a missive which began: "Your questions . . . sound to me as if they'd been formulated by a combination of pedagogues from the Education and Journalism Departments. . . . Don't expect me to write your theme, but I'll answer a few questions."

And from Guthrie, this opening paragraph: "I haven't knowledge enough to give good answers to all the questions you ask about *Montana* . . . but I'll tell you what I know."

Had you been on hand, as I was, when this pair of responses came in the mail and you asked that flustered young Montanan what he had learned from his term paper assignment, you'd have received explicit answers. Sanitize his one about Dobie and it amounted to approximately this: from that old scissorbill in Austin he now knew that a person could do his damndest on a piece of paper and still fall short. And from that A-number-one real gent Guthrie in Great Falls he'd been confirmed that when you ask a Montanan right, you get back civility and I'll-do-what-I-can-for-you.

That long-ago sophomore is no longer a full-time Montanan, but he still feels the way he did—albeit without the blushes and cusses—about the lessons imparted by Dobie and Guthrie. I now know enough about him to be pretty sure they're in him for life.

After all, I'm him.

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thing we had entirely too much of was proximity to each other. Be that as it may, each summer when I came back from Evanston I took a ranch job, if possible on the same ranch where my folks were working. Still Montanan to the core, me, if wearing away a bit at the lobe edges.

I have told in *This House of Sky* what the vehicle of change proved to be. The train. Those three round-trips a year I was making between the West and the Midwest became passages in more ways than one. Each time a day and a half to myself there in the absorbing lean and jostle of the Milwaukee coach cars, as if a more restless gravity worked within those coaches than in the outer world. A day and a half to gaze and doze, doze and gaze; to read, often from the maestro of locomotion himself, novelist Thomas Wolfe: "The great trains cleave through gulch and gully, they rumble with spoked thunder. . . . I will go up and down the country, and back and forth across the country on the great trains that thunder over America. I will go out West where States are square; Oh, I will go to Boise, and Helena and Albuquerque. I will



Four-year-old Ivan Doig stands with his mother and father in 1943 near Sixteen and Grass Mountain when the family lived and worked on the Stewart Ranch.

go to Montana and the two Dakotas. . . ."⁴ And the ceremony of coming and going: I am here to tell you, it was a royal feeling to be the only person getting on or off a train when it stopped in Ringling. For those few minutes you commanded the entire great power chain of the railroad. Trainmen, section crews, depot agent paused in their day because you were of Ringling. The engine hummed there in orange and black grandeur while you placed your foot on the metal step of ascent or descent. The whole dauntless trellis of ties and rails between Chicago and Ringling had been created for this.⁵

TIME ON THAT TRAIN, too, for long thoughts. More and more the rival considerations of home country and chosen profession were accompanying me back and forth now. The last two summers of my college years, I was selected to be on the staff of Northwestern's institute for outstanding high school students interested in journalism. I adored that work. I have always been a more natural editor than I am a writer, and those five-week stints of craftwork I put in on the students' writing assignments contrasted considerably with my subsequent weeks of piling bales of hay. Next, my master's thesis was much praised by the Medill faculty for its dogged research. (Which is to say, for that capacity of mine for writing letters full of questions.) The tussle of home earth and livelihood grew and grew, and Thomas Wolfe now was lending a hand against Montana: *You Can't Go Home Again*—"which means back home to one's family, back home to one's childhood . . . back home to the old forms and systems of things that once seemed everlasting, but are changing all the time—back home to the escapes of Time and Memory."⁶

Then, near the end of spring quarter of my master's degree year, one of the Medill professors called me into his office. James Reston of the *New York Times* had been one of his acquaintances when they both were journalists in Washington, D.C., and he knew Reston took on a young assistant each year.⁷ If I wanted, he would recommend me.

Try taking that with you on a train to Ringling sometime.

To trim the tale, my immediate future was military and the Reston chance had to glimmer away. But livelihood had won. After my six-month Air Force stint I took a job in Illinois as an editorial writer for a newspaper organization with a circulation more than three times the size of the largest daily in Montana at the time. Shortly I moved on to an assistant editor's job at a magazine whose circulation was about three-fifths of Montana's total population.⁸ By now I knew that I was a young man who wanted my words to get somewhere, and so I practiced my profession where an appreciable audience was on hand.

The final two chapters of *This House of Sky* give the gist of my Montana-and-me situation for the next several years. As my father's life dwindled into his long dying, Montana became for me a site of sickness, sadness, strain. Paradise itself would have been a hard place to come to terms with, under those conditions.

4. Thomas Wolfe, *Of Time and the River* (New York: Scribner's, 1952), 331, 157.

5. On the Fourth of July of 1983 I was in Jay and Linda Doig's house overlooking Ringling, and below us a speeder appeared on what was left of the Milwaukee railroad tracks. I was told it was the track removal crew, coming back from fishing in the Sixteen canyon. Tomorrow they would be back at their job of dismantling the railroad. Change is one thing, but diminution is radically another. It made me want to go to the depot, as when I was twenty, and summon the Milwaukee into creation once again.

6. Wolfe to his editor Edward Aswell, quoted by Richard Walser, *Thomas Wolfe: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1961), 117.

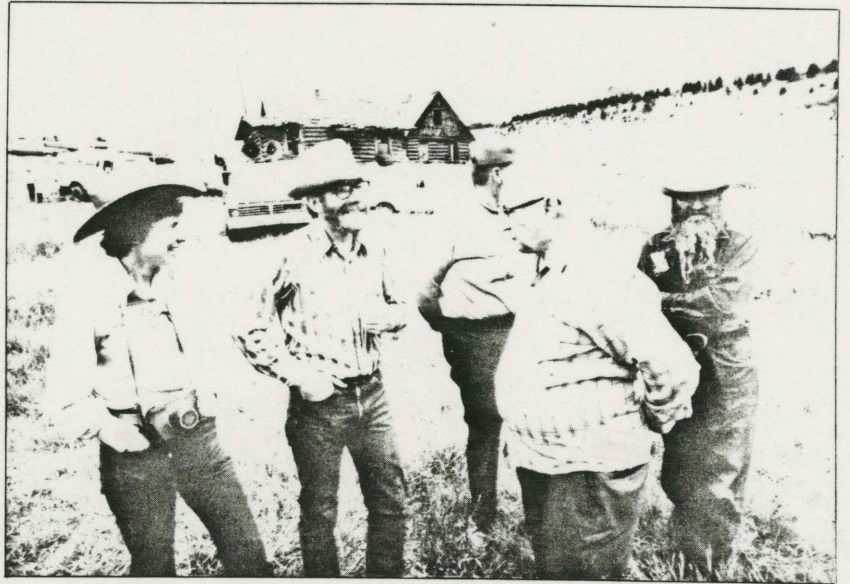
7. The journalism professor was the late David Botter. In a letter to the author, May 15, 1984, James Reston recapitulates his custom of selecting a promising newcomer as his aide: "When I took on the job as Washington Bureau Chief of the *New York Times* . . . I made a deal with The Times that I'd do without a

secretary if they'd let me hire the best young reporter I could find, at no more money, to work for a year with only one promise: that The Times would just consider the possibility of putting him or her on the staff when the year was up. . . . How did we get them? By . . . looking around seriously. Getting the word out to Botter. Asking The Times' regional correspondents to think about who's coming to replace who's going. Sort of a journalistic rather than a football draft, but the same idea." Among those who broke in as Reston's personal assistant are Jonathan Yardley, book editor of the *Washington Post*, and Craig Whitney, Iver Peterson, and Linda Greenhouse of the current *New York Times* staff.

8. According to N. W. Ayer and Son's *Directory, Newspapers and Periodicals* 1963, total daily circulation for the Lindsay-Schaub chain of newspapers was 149,490; that of the *Billings Gazette*, Montana's largest, was 42,680. The 1964 Ayer's gives the circulation of *The Rotarian* magazine as 394,086; Montana's population in the 1960 census was 674,767.

THE SUMMER OF TRUCE at last arrived in 1977, six years after my father's funeral and almost three years after the burial of the last in my Doig-Ringer lineage in the cemetery at White Sulphur Springs, my grandmother. I was working hard at the writing of *This House of Sky*, and Carol and I took ourselves to Montana to see the places and people who could help me put the past into words. Not just did I find that my emotional wariness toward Montana at last was cleansed, Montana had decided to turn itself into a jubilee for me. We went to the twenty-year reunion of my Valier high school class and I there rediscovered friend after friend. Carol and I did a drive from Gardiner to St. Mary, and the *New York Times* travel section front-paged my version as "Yellowstone to Glacier Park Along Oldfangled U.S. 89."⁹ The two of us hiked for five glorious solitary days in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Dupuyer celebrated its centennial with true Dupuyerian élan—a parade complete with horseback parade marshals (the local roping club), a pit

Brian Lanker photo



At the Doig family reunion in 1978, Carol and Ivan Doig talk with John Gruar at the site of the D. L. Doig ranch in the Tierney Basin near Sixteen. Charlie Mitchell is partially obscured in the photo and Jake Mitchell stands at the right.

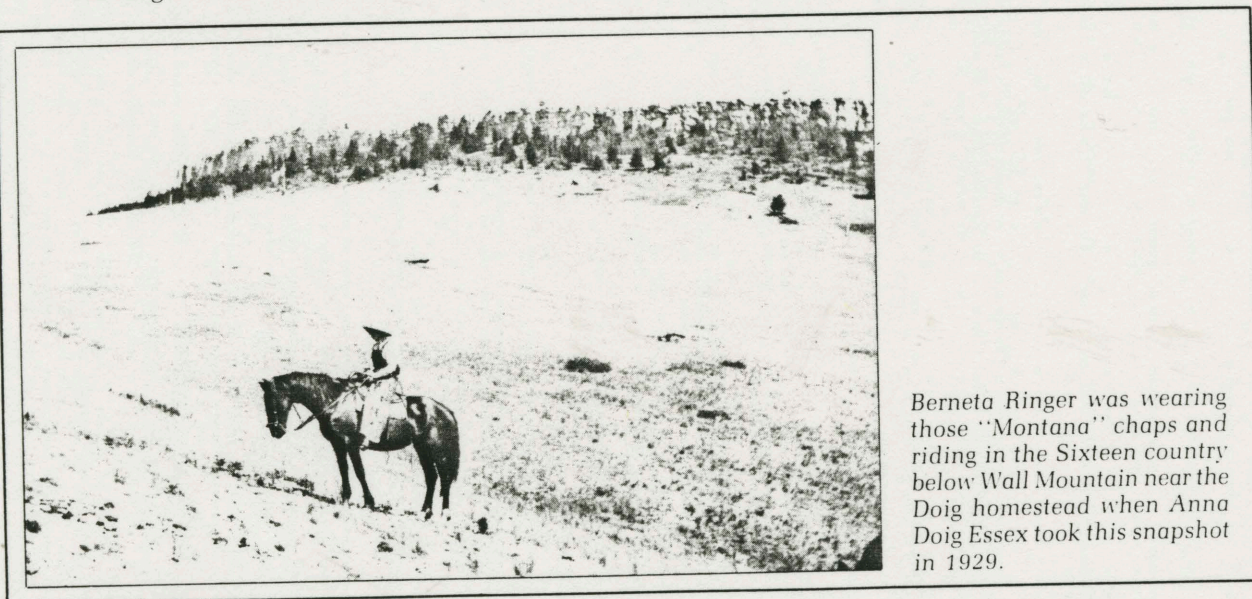
barbecue, a dance, and flowing refreshments. And in between such festivities, my gleaning for material for *This House of Sky* produced and produced; everybody whose aid I sought helped me all they could. The colossal success of that Montana summer brimmed over into the next one, when a Doig family reunion was held in the Sixteen country where our forebears homesteaded and some 160 of us, Doigs and other Tierney Basin descendants, showed up and exulted. Two months after that *This House of Sky* was published, and the armistice between Montana and me turned into something more like being in cahoots.

That quarter-century account of how my contradictory tutelages at last drew together perhaps comes down to this single word: maturity. At least, I'm pretty sure I am less dewy than I was then, and Montana itself may have done some maturing; definitely the state has become more hospitable to workers of words than it used to be. More on that in a little. What I had better tend to first is the current state of affairs between Montana and my work. I live now within half a mile of Puget Sound, a devout refugee from wind and winter, and show no signs of shifting from a Seattle suburban residence. Yet in ways great and small Montana keeps becoming more vital to the writerly part of me than ever. Let me count a handful of those ways.

9. *New York Times*, July 17, 1977, Section 10.1.

Thank heaven, in the Montana version of nomadism my family led while I was growing up we did have a curator along with us. My grandmother, Bessie Ringer, possessed the stubborn knack of hanging on to mementoes and photo albums no matter where our life as ranch gypsies had strewn us at the moment. Her keepsakes truly kept otherwise irretrievable moments: my first published words ("SIXTH GRADE NEWS. We have organized a club. The name of it is the Hornets' Nest club. Frank Nopper is president and Dick Seabrook is vice president. We have our meetings every Friday."—*Meagher County News*, circa 1951) and a grade school booklet my mother made about Montana (I'm glad to see she too was a forthright child: "There are many disadvantages

and—bib overalls? I suppose it was to make sure about the bib overalls that I first put a magnifying glass to this picture and discovered that the real story is those chaps. For under magnification it is revealed that down that leg-length of leather, MONTANA is spelled out in fancy rivets, and a heart with initials in it puts period to the tidings.¹¹ All of which reminds me, as I see too in my trigged-up father and his brothers posing ready for rodeo, that those Montanans were not just westerners, they were westerners who liked to dress up to the part whenever the chance came. My mother was born in Wisconsin, my father's parents grew up in Scotland. Here, not many years after such origins, are Montanans who would have looked like Calamity Jane and Tom Mix back there in our ancestral environs.



Berneta Ringer was wearing those "Montana" chaps and riding in the Sixteen country below Wall Mountain near the Doig homestead when Anna Doig Essex took this snapshot in 1929.

to farming in some parts of Montana. . . . Some times there is alkali ground and in other places gumbo soil and then the chinook winds and grasshoppers and all different kinds of insects and some times not enough rainfall.¹⁰) My grandmother's greatest trove, however, was photographic: the five-hundred-and-some family pictures she conserved and passed to me. Those photos trigger not merely memories—much of what is portrayed took place before I arrived on the scene—they bring me messages from the past.

Exhibit A: the tableau of my mother on horseback, beneath one of the walls of rock in the Sixteen country. She wears chaps, a big hat,

I stroll around this suburb of mine looking like a stray hermit, and am matter of fact about much else of my western existence. My mother, the rhinestone cowgirl in that photo, tells me to give the people of my books more sartorial imagination than shows up on me.

Exhibit B: the trophy picture from the war with the coyotes. Since I, little Mr. Personality there in the middle, look to be about a three-year-old, it likely was near the end of the winter of 1941-1942. The locale, the Jim Stewart ranch in southwestern Meagher County, at the foot of Grass Mountain. This scene speaks to me in several ways. First of all, the extraordinary statement of the coyotes, all twenty-eight of them in

10. The club name emulated that of the school's athletic teams, the White Sulphur Springs Hornets.

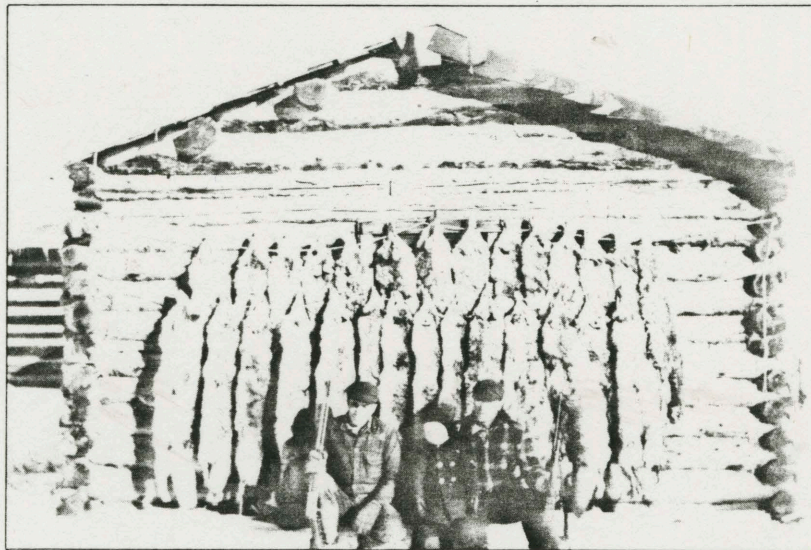
11. These were the inspiration for the chaps worn by Leona Tracy in *English Creek*.

simultaneous leap of death up that log wall. Winterlong they had been picked off, for the sake of bounty and the safety of livestock, as they loped the open ridges of the Stewart place; ideal coyote country, but unluckily for them, also ideal coyote-hunting country for guys who could shoot like my father, Charlie Doig, and my uncle, Bud Ringer. How young Bud looks, I notice next. He is now a grandfather and he hunts no more. And now, it always comes as a pleasant shock, how in charge of life my father looks. Posed there, he knows of at least twenty-eight coyotes who will give him no further trouble, a chinook either has arrived to his ranch or is on its way, he has a son and heir, his wife

Exhibit C: the cast photo of the Dupuyer community play, February, 1957. Ten of us in *The Gal from Texas, or: Cousin Jill from Junction Hill*. Be not deceived by the mustaches blacked onto Sal Morris and Gertie Chadwick; there was a chronic shortage of males with the time and temperament to put up with nights of rehearsals, and so the cast of *The Gal* consisted of eight females, the local teacher Scotty Crumpacker, and me, a high school senior. Those weeks of rehearsal and performance were the first extended time I spent around a group of women I wasn't related to. I think it is no coincidence that women have impressed me ever since.

How could they not, when beings such as

Bud Ringer, Ivan Doig, and Charlie Doig posed for Berneta Doig's camera in 1942 in front of twenty-eight coyote pelts, trophies of the winter's kill at the Jim Stewart ranch near Sixteen.



is taking the picture of this proud moment (it will be three years yet until my mother's death). A day to mark, truly.

But now this photo ages twenty-some years. The coyotes and Bud and I and the Stewart ranch dissolve away. Only my father is left in the scene I see. He has emphysema now, although we do not yet know its name, and he tinkers away at one of the last small jobs of his life. It is temporary, short-term: a stint of poisoning gophers, who have multiplied now that the coyotes have declined.

I read that the Thule Eskimos of Greenland have a phrase, "the weight of life."¹² While looking at the coyote photo I hear it echo all the way to Montana.

Gertie Chadwick are in their ranks? During those high school years of mine when I boarded in Dupuyer with the Chadwicks and ate my meals at the counter in the Home Cafe she ran, Gertie became one of the two new pillars of my life.¹³ Four years I watched that block of a woman deal with whatever needed dealing with, whether it was to pump gasoline for a motorist while Harold and Tom were deep in a greasy repair at the back of the garage, or to open the cafe on Christmas so Dupuyer's old guys would have a holiday meal of some sort. Gertie saw, did, and did again if it was needed. Some of what she did was news to me. Gertie was the first woman I had ever come across who not simply tolerated fishing but was downright avid about it. She

12. Jean Malaurie, *The Last Kings of Thule* (New York: Dutton, 1982), 80.

13. The other was Frances Tidyman, my English teacher at Valier

high school, whom I've written about at some length in *This House of Sky*, 189-194. Gertie Chadwick died in 1974, Frances Tidyman in 1962.

could walk me to death in that brush jungle along Dupuyer Creek. In short, Gertie was my instructor that competence—and friendship—does not have to stop at boundaries of gender, and to me much is symbolized by her toggled up there for the role of “the shady Mr. Sheedy” in our Dupuyer premiere of *The Gal*. Yes, yes, yes, it was only a play, Gertie and Sal took those

amounts to more than our personal sums. We have a collective memory, we really do. Sometimes in spite of ourselves. How much I owe to Merrill Burlingame for his desperate action, that day when he rescued the WPA Federal Writers Project files from the maw of the Butte dump.¹⁵ Nearly four decades later, in I came to the Special Collections at the MSU



The Dupuyer community play cast of *The Gal* from Texas included, back row (left to right), Nettie Jannusch, Gertie Chadwick, Nonie Mozer, Marion Bills, Ivan Doig; front row, Carol Wall, Scotty Crum-packer, Maxine Nielson, Sal Morris, Harriet Hayne.

Carol Independent Observer

men's roles because somebody had to, sociology does not ramify from such twigs of circumstance. But no way can I imagine, even though they could hardly be more different in personality and appearance, Beth McCaskill of *English Creek* showing up in my fiction without my years around Gertie Chadwick. And for as far as I can see ahead in my writing, there is a weathered but sturdy line of Montana caryatids.¹⁴

While the Montana I came from, the Montana that changed the Doigs from Scots into American westerners, is preserved in my family's photographs, other people's Montanas have been accumulating in larger lodes. I suppose for anybody who is not a researching writer to have to listen to enthusiasm about archives is like somebody dubious about fish eggs having to hear caviar extolled. But like it or don't, the past, and the present that keeps enlisting in it,

library and merrily ransacked those invaluable first-hand accounts of life during the Depression: now the people of my fiction dance to a square dance call from out of those WPA files, they remember roundups recounted therein, they enjoy at their Fourth of July picnic the spring fryers menued there. And the ranch and Forest Service lingo murmuring within the holdings of the University of Montana archives, and the Montana Historical Society library's ready answers to pesky questions—what was the daily fishing limit in 1939? was there any project in Glacier Park in the summer of 1914 that might have used workhorses?—those are the makings for work such as mine.¹⁶ Archivally speaking, Montana has both luck and good sense, which surprisingly often go together. The luck is a matter of proportion; Montana is young enough and small enough in population that it is not the historical and cultural labyrinth that, say, Texas

14. Caryatid: a supporting column sculptured in the form of a woman.

15. Burlingame thinks it was 1943 when he and an MSU colleague went to the WPA warehouse in Butte on a scholarly errand, noticed the six or eight file cabinets of the Montana Writers Pro-

ject near the door to the loading dock, asked the administrator about them, “and she informed us that they would go to the Butte city dump in the morning. We backed her into whatever corner was available and told her she could not do that. She assured us in unprintable but perfectly clear English that she

or California is. And a vigorous state historical society, the published collections of local history which even the smallest communities seem able to muster (Dupuyer's ran to 388 pages), the newspaper stashes in county and local libraries (usually genuine newsprint instead of that boon to optometry, microfilm)—every whit of that, I call civic good sense.

Call it more than that, in fact. Go into French and call it *Annales*, the mosaic type of historiography that has brought forth masterworks such as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's recreation of a fourteenth-century village, *Montaillou*.¹⁷ It is not inconceivable, given the American West's lengthening strands of cultural geography, folklore, literary narrative, archival enterprise, and historical insight, that we may yet see some kind of a Montana *Montaillou* woven. Browning, Ekalaka, Two Dot, Wisdom, we may not generally think of as candidates to become a classic. And yet, to put it in one of the

I haven't been everywhere—are drink and orneriness." He says this while trying to cope simultaneously with a drunk camptender and a draggy packhorse. I call that duress. To be more honest than smart, though, I'll admit I about half-share my character's sentiment.

I'm going to save the treatise on orneriness for some other time, except to aver that I look on an ornery streak as a virtue, at least in literary terms. "Variant of ORDINARY," my dictionary imparts about the origin of ornery, and variants are some of a writer's best friends. But the Montana capacity for whoopee, liquid style, does need some discussing. It helped to shape my boyhood, and thus to shape my perspective of Montana.

My viewpoint here derives from the five years, after my mother's death and before my grandmother joined up with us, when my father solved the problem of what to do with me by simply taking me wherever he went. If that was

Charlie Doig and friend Leo Ailey posed with Bessie Ringer in White Sulphur Springs in 1966 just as they left to go fishing.



Montanan terms my tongue still has the habit of, just why the hell not?

By the time this reaches print, some of you may have noted that in *English Creek*, my novel which is set in Montana of the 1930s, I feature a Montanan who at one point says: "I have long thought that the two commonest afflictions in Montana—it may be true everywhere, but then

into a bar, where he did most of his visiting and a considerable portion of his business as a ranch foreman and hay contractor, in I went too. So far as I know, neither of us ever was lectured that a bar is no place for a seven-eight-nine-ten-year-old. Had we been, and had Dad and I thought it through, I believe we still would have concluded that a bar had its good points for a child.

could and would." They at last managed to plead the case for sanctuary for the files at MSU, and first thing the next morning Burlingame was back in Butte with a truck and driver and got them. Merrill G. Burlingame to author, June 2, 1984.

16. The limit was twenty-five fish, and the pertinent Glacier Park project was the road being built between St. Mary and Babb.

17. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (New York: George Braziller, 1978).

at least for so sobersided a child as I was. For in those knots of drinking men in the Stockmen and the Maverick and the Mint, I learned much about listening, and how to see in detail. There is nothing like watching alcohol change a person before your eyes to acquaint you with shades of character.

I also learned language there, and not just the salted kind. I recall the night Dad was in the Pioneer in White Sulphur, drinking with a gent who was the black sheep of a prominent family. The man was known to be a wizard with horses and hopeless whenever a beer bottle was within sight. Veteran barhop that I was, I was used to drinkers teetering off the bar stool every so many beers to head for the toilet. But this man paused, tottered, turned formally to the two of us and enunciated: "Please excuse me. I have to go empty my bladder." Maybe right there, in those primed-up words, it dawned on me that there is more than one way to say a thing.

In a more perfect world, I suppose a writer no longer would hang around bars to hear what's being said. It would perpetually be the first really pleasant evening of June and we would all be out on the screened-in porch, sipping herbal tea and discussing astrophysics. But in the imperfect meantime between here and there: welcome, word-thirsty scrivener, to the Stockman in White Sulphur, the M and M in Butte, the Oxford in Missoula, the Ranger in Dupuyer, and a few hundred other Montana watering-holes which have served not merely as the state's saloons but its salons.

Ronald Blythe, who in *Akenfield* achieved high literature by catching the voices of villagers

in East Anglia, cites the power of Thomas Hardy whenever Hardy got down to describing worklife in the west of England. The chapter in *Far From the Madding Crowd* when the sheep-shearing takes place in a splendid four-hundred-year-old barn, asserts Blythe, "directs us towards a vision of fundamental labor that contains within it satisfactions that are usually searched for in poetry and religion. Scenes such as this are the permanent cliffs in his writing, stalwart headlands against which melodrama and suspense can fret and dash without any danger of their becoming merely sensational movement. They steady his story-telling and fill it with meditation." Then this: "In such episodes we are made to share in [Hardy's] strangely divided intelligence, on the one hand seeing life as the countryman himself sees it and, on the other, through a private imagination which depends upon certain basic everyday matters to fuel it for his flights."¹⁸

Concurred. Montana's basic everyday matters — i.e., work—seem to me to be perpetual fuel for a writer. James Welch's description of the lackadaisical bale piler, Raymond Long Knife: "He had learned to give the illusion of work, even to the point of sweating as soon as he put his gloves on. . . ."¹⁹ Mildred Walker's terse and eloquent scene of a family pausing for lunch in the field during wheat harvest: "We stopped at noon and ate by the combine that gave the only shade in all that blazing sun. Mom had a thermos of cold milk that tasted best of all. And then we were back at it."²⁰ I like such instances of characterization intelligently brought forth from western task. (Truth be told, I like them better



Bessie Ringer's family photo archives included this picture of her and Charlie Doig in front of the Montana Historical Society building in Helena in 1959.

than Hardy's Wessex efforts.) And they instruct me, whenever I start to assemble a cast of characters, to get out into the workaday world and recruit some sheepherders, ditch riders, forest rangers, bartenders, hay hands . . .

Which brings me back to Montana at about the same place where my residency ceased a couple of decades ago, a hayfield. In one of those

taught me to despise a number of things I still believe are worth despising. Economic domination from afar, whether afar is across a continent or up the stories of a corporate high-rise. The tacit acceptance—Montana is far from alone in this, it is a national deliberate blind-spot—that so many of the silos beside green fields have to hold not silage, but thermonuclear death. The

Photo by Orville Latham

This photo of Bessie Ringer and Charlie Doig shoveling snow in Ringling was taken during the winter of 1964. They were clearing the road for a neighbor who was returning home from the hospital.



last summers before military service and my eventual jobs in journalism concluded my haying career, two other bale pilers and I worked our proverbial tails off trying to build the tightest, prettiest stacks in the country. On that same ranch the very next summer I saw the arrival of a "self-piling" trailer which hitched behind the baler. The cost of it probably would have paid a piling crew's wages for a number of summers and it dumped its accumulated bales into wobbly unweatherproof heaps which would have got us mere mortals fired by noon of the first day. But here the contraption was, religiously being used because it eliminated one hired man. That taught me a lot about what craftsmanship can look forward to in a mechanizing world.

I want not to make too much of this fifth and final instance of influence, but neither can it be scanted: not all of Montana's lessons to me have been rosy ones. Indeed, Montana valuably

chemicalization of agriculture, the shopping malling that dooms perfectly serviceable downtowns: Montana has not been immune.

But do I expect Montana to behave better than America-at-large? Frankly, sure. Montana's people have shown their civic capacities in the 1972 revamping of the state constitution, in some stiff environmental laws, in the coal tax, in the general neighborliness that endures in the state. Think what a place it could be if such effort were extended. Now, I will be the first to say that Montana's civic deportment should not unduly concern a writer ensconced in Seattle. But let's settle for duly: if Montana is to have an affinity for my books, I need to have an affinity for Montana; which means a concern for the state, hopes and fears for its societal well-being. For if this recounting of the long tussle between my home earth and my chosen profession means anything, it is that the passion has never let up on either side.

18. Ronald Blythe, *Characters and Their Landscapes* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 137.

19. James Welch, *Winter in the Blood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 24.

20. Mildred Walker, *Winter Wheat* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944), 125.

WE HAVE THEIR WORDS for it: Montana does elicit things from writers. Not always their best, particularly if they come from afar and go through fast. One of our true precisionists of prose, E. B. White, struck Montana in a Model T in July 1922 and went uncharacteristically wavery in his next letter home: "... there is something about Montana ranch country so wildly enchanting as to be almost fearsome. Stand on the plains in the valley of the Yellowstone; watch great herds advancing grimly, like the ranks of an army, into the sun. The leaves of the aspens quiver down by the banks of the Yellowstone. And you don't know anything of what they whisper. And the herd which you thought was a mile away you now know is three miles away. You look at the painted buttes, silhouetted majestically, and you don't know whether they are a hundred feet high or a hundred thousand. . . ." ²¹ In *Blue Highways*, proclaimed to be an odyssey of America's "back roads," William Least Heat Moon scooted across the Highline on main route U.S. 2 (as he writes of it, he drove from Shelby to Wolf Point in one monumentally monotonous day) and thereby overshot some of the prime literary territory in all of Indian fiction: down the Fort Belknap reservation toward the Little Rocky Mountains and the Missouri-brinking country, the region where James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* and *The Death of Jim Loney* and Wayne Ude's *Becoming Coyote* unfold. ²² And in 1938, a few months before the end of his life, Thomas Wolfe did come out West. He was driven through Browning on June 29 and the total notebook entry by this chronicler who had written with such appetite for America's muss and fuss was: "Browning—all confused, disorderly and Indian." ²³ Compare that, say, with Richard Hugo's rich poem, "A Night at the Napi in Browning." ²⁴

Hugo's sixteen-year career of poetic craft in Montana is a stellar illustration that writers who have hung around the state for a while seem to be vivified by it. In an ambitious collection of current Western prose—*Writers of the Purple Sage*—nine of the seventeen selected authors have put in time, past or recent, in Montana. ²⁵ Nowadays not only are courses in Montana literature taught within the state; in courses of Pacific Northwest and Western literature elsewhere, Montana books show up in gangs. A. B. Guthrie, Jr., brought home to Montana a Pulitzer Prize, Norman Maclean was robbed of one, Hugo should have been given a couple. ²⁶ "Oro y Plata," my eye; Ink and Paper. ²⁷ I vividly remember a phone call from an Idaho bookseller, soon after *This House of Sky* appeared, remarking that he'd recently been to a reading by Hugo, and now here was my book and a recent one by Hjortsberg, and novels were on their way by Welch and McGuane, and then there was Kittredge and DeMarinis and Dorothy Johnson and Mary Clearman—"you guys from Montana," he pondered, "there must be something in the water up there." ²⁸

21. Dorothy Lobrano Guth, ed., *Letters of E. B. White* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 52.

22. William Least Heat Moon, *Blue Highways: A Journey Into America* (New York: Random House, 1982), 269-272. I am indebted to Joe Butwin, in his review in *Pacific Northwest* magazine, May 1983, for his discernment that "[Least Heat Moon's] journey through the West is pretty quick, and the roads are decidedly red—federal and state highways that require little diversion."

23. Richard S. Kennedy and Paschal Reeves, eds., *The Notebooks of Thomas Wolfe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1970), 985.

24. Richard Hugo, *Making Certain It Goes On: The Collected Poems of Richard Hugo* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 208. The poem includes the sentence: "I hear between the lines/the novel no one wants."

25. Russell Martin and Marc Barasch, eds., *Writers of the Purple Sage: An Anthology of Recent Western Writing* (New York: Viking, 1984). The Montana nine: Norman Maclean, David Quam-

men, Rick DeMarinis, Richard Ford, David Long, William Kittredge, Thomas McGuane, James Welch, and yours truly.

26. Guthrie won the Pulitzer for fiction in 1950 for *The Way West*. On the Pulitzer advisory board's rejection of the Pulitzer fiction jury's choice of *A River Runs Through It* for the 1977 prize, see "Pulitzer Loser Proves Winner In Other Areas," *New York Times*, April 24, 1977, 40. As to Hugo's lack of Pulitzers, compare his *The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir* with the 1974 winner, *The Dolphin* by Robert Lowell, or his *Selected Poems* with the 1980 winner, Donald Justice's *Selected Poems*, or *The Right Madness on Skye* with the 1981 winner, *The Morning of the Poem* by James Schuyler, and judge for yourself.

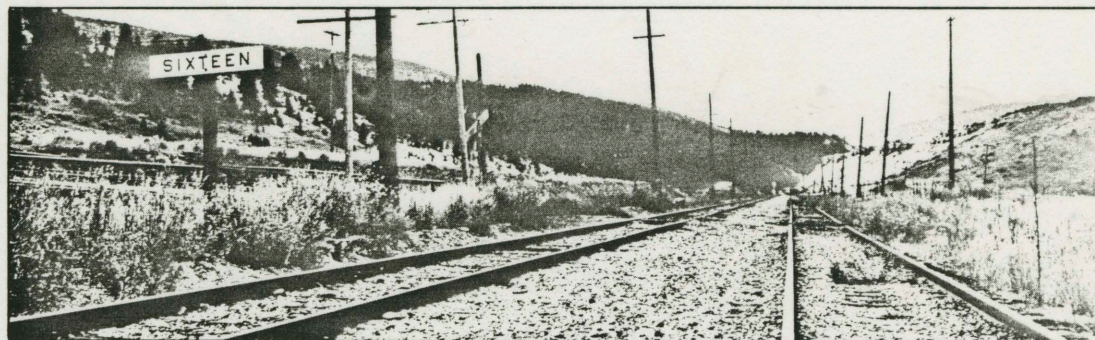
27. Montana's official motto: Oro y Plata (Gold and Silver). Time for a change, I say.

28. William Hjortsberg's novel was *Falling Angel* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978). The one forthcoming from James Welch was *The Death of Jim Loney* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) and the one from Thomas McGuane was *Nobody's Angel* (New York: Random House, 1982).

Where, in all this matter of breezing-through-Montana versus hunkering-down-in-Montana do I now stand? In a straddle. Two of my four books to date have been about Montana, springing from sojourn after sojourn in the state; and at least my next two—a pair of novels it'll take me most of the rest of the 1980s to achieve—will be Montana books as well, derived from further time and research effort within Montana. Yet I am mindful that during the writing of *English Creek*, when I was searching out people who had survived the Depression and the drought and the grasshoppers along the Highline, here came a letter from the vicinity of Havre asking: "Dear Sir . . . Why are you, a Washingtonian, writing about Montana anyway?"

As I was saying about Montanans and orneriness . . .

No, actually that skeptical correspondent's point is as pertinent as can be. It is one thing to be a kind of ineradicable Montanan-by-birth-and-upbringing and maintain an interest in the state's civic temperature, as I have just said. It is another to make Montana the focus of your work while dwelling somewhere else. Which, I think, is why my writing tends toward the Montana of yesterday. *That* Montana, I remain a full-fledged citizen of. You can't go home again? You can't *not* go home again. Recollections constantly decree it. Language says it every time you open your mouth and utter, as at least one of your Montanan parents surely did, "How you doin'?" What you like to eat or don't. Whiteness of the jackknife scar on your finger. The color of your eyes. Your name. Where does any of it come from but back there? And so, as a writer here I am, back where I have ever been. For I'm fully convinced that in my case—and I think even in Thomas Wolfe's, whose novels got gassier the farther he got from remembrance of his hometown in North Carolina and forthright experiences such as riding on trains—what I write best arises back there in time and memory.



WHAT GOES AROUND comes around. A quarter of a century since I was that nineteen-year-old, I still spend a lot of my time writing questions to people—although these days, I generally am asking them about Montana rather than *Montana*.

Montanans hold up their end of the long correspondence as staunchly as ever. I have even heard again from the Highline geezer who nailed me as a current resident of the state of Washington. After explaining my background, I had furnished him a list of exact questions about a farming life during the Depression. This time his response began: "Dear Ivan—When I try to get down to specifics I don't remember much. But I'll talk anyway."

Then for three pages, handwritten full on both sides, he civilly proceeded to.

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