farming: carpentry of soil & crops (craft or art instead of science)
the texture of a community of hired hands: see "Class & Culture among Farm Servants..." in Social Class in Scotland.
The Indian tribes (Blackfeet after Marias Massacre) had gone to pieces under the white push...

White rural life similarly going to pieces now?

The plains, the West, as a field of maneuvers by greater forces (national, economic) than any of the individuals trying to live there for the cycles of the land and seasons?
Maybe use the sheriff's "instant of discovery" (ms draft p. 7) as unstated intro into larger theme(s) of the novel: turning points, decision points, of history, some of which fail ultimately (like Darius Duff's Bolshevism) and some of which wreak unintended consequences (such as the effects of damming the Missouri).