these seem to be my notes for Montana Historical Society panel in Billings in '80

Since I'm supposed to say just about everything I know at lunch today, I don't have all that much to add here.

I'll simply try talk a bit as a Montanan who has moved away, or stayed away, to do his writing.

I doubt that I'm best source on this, but I think my absence from my home state says more about me than it does about Mont.

I left, without entirely knowing it probably was permanent, almost half my lifetime ago, after college — of course I had gone away to college. By that time, in my late teens or early twenties, my view of Mont. was that of a summer brief hand.
My family, my father and grandmother and I, were pretty close to out of money, if two of them were even closer to prospect of never being able to have much. So there was a powerful economic push operating on me—to get out of Ringling and go make a living at my chosen profession. Journalism, at time.

I began, at a chain of daily newspapers in Decatur, Illinois—& believe me, Decatur was not all that much of a place—at more than twice monthly salary my father or grandmother had ever earned in their lives.
There was, of course, too, a push of youthfulness, of aspiration, of restlessness—whatever you'd call it—from that life as a hired hand, which to me meant, from Montana. I did not like working for other people in somebody's hire. I since have discovered that it's not only hire of ranchers or farmers I was determined not to spend further time in—it was anybody's hire, a newspaper's, a magazine's, or a university's. But at the time, it was particularly the life of a ranch hand I was determined to escape. I remember that in the late summer of 1962, just before I was to go to Air Force basic training in Texas, I spent my last few weeks as a ranch hand, helping out with the harvest on a ranch near Ringling where my folks were working. We were binding, and I was riding the binder, tripping the lever to let down bundles in rows. That spring I had got my master's degree in jrn from NV, I remember someone joking that when I got my PhD, I'd come back to drive the tractor instead of riding the binder, and I remember saying, thanks, but I didn't think so.
Those seem to me just reasons for having left Montana.

But why, as an adult, not come back?

Economics is still in there as a factor, if I had all the money I could imagine, I would certainly spend quite a lot more time here—have a second home, in fact of real estate as well as of heart and mind. But I don’t—writing continues to be a precarious undertaking. I continue to lean heavily on that one great charity so many writers need—a working spouse with a monthly income.

But beyond money matters, there is —dailiness of life, of how I choose to put in my time, and that too operates, if not against Montana, at least in favor of where I’ve lived these past 14 years, Seattle.
Do I think I would have become a writer of some sort if I hadn't had my Montana background? Yes.

Do I think I would have become the sort of writer I am without it? No, definitely not.

Do I think I would have been able to write House of Sky, and other Montana books I hope to undertake, without having left Montana? Probably not.

It seems to be a matter of metabolism with me. I don't get much done in life except to write and read, and come out a time or two a year for something like this: with Montana weather and distances (etc.) thrown in, I would get less, maybe nothing, done.
I find Seattle, the coastal climate, very favorable to my work, and the way I want to spend my life.
(I have to say, I am feeling punished a bit by Seattle’s youth...) About right size when I moved there...

Then there’s one wild card, in all this matter of where I live, and why it’s not Montana. It’s nothing I could have predicted of myself in life, and I’m sure it fits no existing school of literary theory — but it’s perhaps, only American writer with a kind word to say for suburbs, such as: one I live in just north of Seattle. A good many East Coast writers made their rep’s, some time back, by satirizing suburban America. Many of their jokes have some
truth: suburban life can have a smugness, a homogeneity — a
vanilla-ness — about it.
But for me, at least for now, it has attractions, in some of same qualities those Eastern novelists have savaged. The blindness, the not knowing your neighbor down street, or perhaps not talking with the one next door—gives me the kind of isolation I need to work. It doesn't bother me to not have social life or within my neighborhood— I prefer it that way. Besides, Montana seems to me a much better place to socialize.

So, not to make too much of this, but my current suburban way of life does provide a steadiness, and the time by myself—yet facilities of the great U. of W library & archives 20 minutes away—to get my writing done. Both H of Spy & W Bros came out of this routine of life.

I think that's more than enough about me as a creature of habitat. Let me just boil down my viewpoints on this, and then I'll spend a few minutes on other considerations about Mont. & Writing
If I've left Mont, Mont of corn has not left me. I think Mont has great resources for a writer.

- The language, a particular interest of mine. There is still a great snap & 448, & vernacular of various periods of livelihoods.

- The growing literary tradition. Time was, Bud Guthrie if I suppose Dorothy Jr. pretty much shouldered tradition alone for us out here. The encouragement of their example, in proving that you could persevere as a writer, using Mont material, I think has been potent.

C "you Mont. guys: Welch
Crum
DeHanna
Hoff
Hugo
Spg"
Then, just very briefly, I wonder if there aren’t some intangibles, of us & Mont., which have helped produce our writing. I can’t do much more than suggest them, standing up here trying to think out loud, but it seems to me there may be a couple of kinds of particular Mont. oxygen. Of us on this panel have all imbibed.
I'm not sure what the 4 of us have in common, besides princely charm and sweet dispositions....

(totup livelihoods)

Bud and [some truck driving, some teaching, some general messing around]

A couple of us have been newspapermen, but the other pair stayed more or less honest.

...If any of us had done any mining or bartending, we'd just about be a composite of Montanans, of our generation, and perhaps that comes through in our writing that we know the tasks.

--Also, it may be that Montana simply likes to kick around a bit until we were ready to do something worthwhile.

--I don't know that any of us would have been a first choice momma for somebody to write a famous book. Jim I guess was the most precocious, writing Earthboy in his early 30s, but I was very nearly 40, Bud was 60, and Spike most likely was somewhere over voting age too....

We'd been around a while -- we had something to say from life.
I think geography accounts for much of it. I spent a little time in southeastern Alaska this summer, and noticed there that while there were real similarities to Montana, such a strong energy level and abundant mountains, geography made the difference. Instead of Montana's big valleys and wide horizons, southeastern Alaskan towns perch on shore ledges about as wide as this hotel. I think the closeness makes the energy build up, ricochet. My wife remarked when we got to Prince Rupert in BC that it finally felt as if you could put your elbows out. We met various people saying they had books they wanted to write — their themes often seemed as closed-in as their communities or households.