



Introduction

I drove past the sign next to the ranch driveway, stopped, slowly backed up, then looked again: “Registered Polled Herefords.”

Huh?

For more than two decades, I’ve lived in Montana—a state where cattle rule—and until recently I knew nothing about livestock.

I’m also embarrassed to admit I didn’t know how a grain elevator worked, the difference between hard and soft wheat, or why some hay bales are square and others are round.

Or what “hay” even is, for that matter.

My cluelessness included entire systems of working lands, like sheep farming, logging, highways, energy, and the process of converting Pondera County wheat into Japanese udon noodles.

I’m not alone. Many friends and colleagues, especially those who grew up in suburbs or cities as I did, admit they don’t understand how much of Montana operates. Exceptions include the many Montana Fish, Wildlife &

Parks employees closely familiar with ag life, often having grown up on farms or ranches themselves.

As for the rest of us, if we lived in Chicago or Boston it might be okay not to know what a steer or a windrow or a pivot irrigator is. But Montana is a rural state. All of us who live here should be familiar with at least the basics of rural life.

This issue is an attempt to do that.

About a year ago, I began jotting down everything I couldn’t identify or didn’t understand as I drove around Montana. For explanations, I visited with ranchers, farmers, Montana State University extension agents, and others, and I dove deep into books, publications, and websites. I boiled all that information down and ran the results past more experts to ensure accuracy.

Finally, I handed the text to our art director, Luke Duran, who put it all together, as he does with each issue, into the beautiful magazine you hold in your hands.

You’ve heard of “An Insider’s Guide” to some place or another? Think of this as “An Outsider’s Guide” to rural Montana.

We produced this unique issue of *Montana Outdoors* because we believe there is a need for basic information about rural life ordinarily not found in this magazine—or in any other publication. Information that helps

put the state’s renowned rivers, reservoirs, state parks, wildlife management areas, national forests, and other recreational sites into the context of a larger landscape.

Why this magazine? One reason is that much of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks’ public information, including many *Montana Outdoors* articles, comes under what I would characterize as “What Landowners Need to Understand”—about protecting wetlands, saving sagebrush, conserving uplands, protecting riparian areas, allowing public access, and on and on. FWP has so many messages it wants to get across to landowners.

This issue of *Montana Outdoors* turns that around and focuses on some of what the rest of us need to understand.

Many people, including quite a few of us

who live here, think of Montana as the scenes featured in tourism calendars and coffee table books—the mountain goat in Glacier National Park, drift boats floating along the Big Hole, a bull elk bugling in the morning mist, the underground wonders of Lewis and Clark Caverns. Which is fine. These and other depictions are true and scenic aspects of our state.

But they don’t represent most of Montana, the places *in between* the glossy calendar pages. The ordinary working lands.

We hope that reading this issue will help you see and appreciate those in-between places and the people living there. To understand the strong ties so many rural residents have with the land where they live and work each day. And to comprehend why they are so determined to keep their

operations afloat when it would be far easier to sell.

As one Cascade County rancher wrote of hanging onto his family’s multi-generational operation, “To sell the ranch would be akin to losing an arm or a leg, or more accurately, a big chunk of our soul.”

This summer, as you drive around Montana exploring the state’s many recreational sites, keep this issue handy to help explain at least some of that sentiment. Toss it in the glove box. Use it whenever you or a passenger see something you don’t recognize or understand. Our hope is that it will not only explain how working lands and infrastructure function, but also why they matter.

—Tom Dickson, Editor

This special issue is broken into nine main articles—Crops, Hay, Reservations, Livestock, Logging, Ground Transportation, Energy, Semi-Rural Housing, and Rural Wildlife—summarizing major operations or features of Montana’s working lands. Scattered throughout are also 40 smaller “Through the Windshield” pieces that explain aspects of working lands that a person might encounter anywhere in rural Montana.



Trying to figure out how it all works.

FROM LEFT: PHOTO COMPOSITES; LUKE DURAN; NICHOLAS DANIELSON



A two-track road runs through a ranch along the Rocky Mountain Front. Several factors account for why so few people live in Montana east of the Divide.

Background

Rural Montana's history is as vast as the landscape itself, yet three developments in particular—geography, the homestead era, and mechanization—go a long way toward explaining why much of the state is so sparsely populated and what that means to residents, communities, and the state's economy.

The first development occurred millions of years ago when geological plates pushed up Earth's upper surface and created the Rocky Mountains, which run north-south from British Columbia to New Mexico. As warm, moist air moves east from the Pacific coast, it hits the mountains and rises, losing heat as it goes. The cooling moisture condenses and creates clouds, which eventually become so heavy with water that they drop rain or snow. That's why there's always more precipitation at high elevations.

But by the time the air passes over the

Rockies, it has been wrung dry, leaving little moisture for areas east of the Continental Divide.

The difference in rainfall affects vegetation. West of the Di-

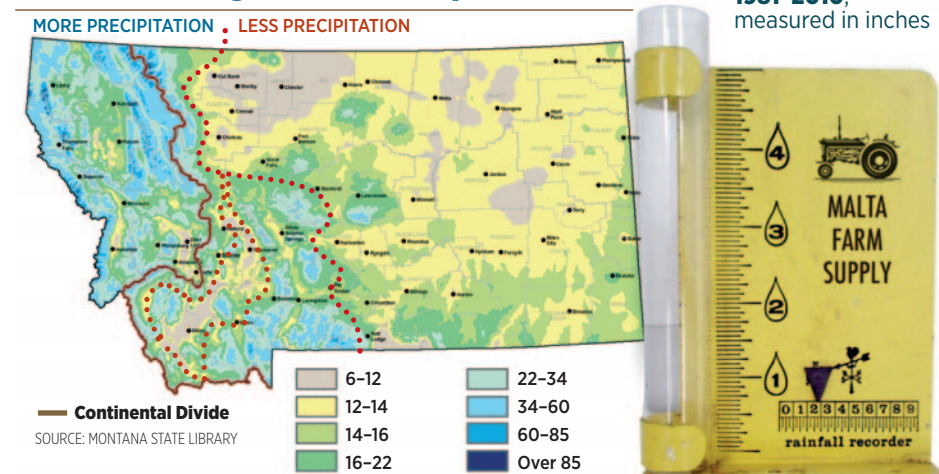
vide are vast forests of tall pines, firs, spruce, and other conifers that require cool mountain temperatures and steady precipitation.

Compare that to the dry, windswept east, historically blanketed mostly by shortgrass (ankle- to knee-high), mixed-grass (knee- to waist-high), and sagebrush prairie.

FIRST PEOPLES

The lack of rain and snow was no hardship for the people who lived east of the Rockies

Montana Average Annual Precipitation



for thousands of years before European settlement. The Great Plains were rich in wildlife, with bison being especially important for making tools, clothing, shelter, food, and containers. Indian bands moved seasonally around the region, following bison herds while harvesting and processing native plants like prairie turnips, bitterroot, arrowleaf balsamroot, and wild fruits such as chokecherries, buffaloberries, and wild plums. The native plants had adapted to the dry conditions of the northern Great Plains and thrived even during regular cycles of drought.

Indigenous people also “worked” the landscape by setting fires that reinvigorated prairie grasses, creating green pastures of new growth attractive to bison, pronghorn, elk, and deer. They invented and refined new weapons—first the atlatl, which used lever physics to project spears faster and farther than a person could throw, and then the more versatile bow and arrow. They also developed sophisticated ways of hunting, especially the complex, multi-person operation of moving a bison herd along V-shaped drive lines marked with stone cairns to their death off cliffs.

THE HOMESTEAD ERA

It was not until the early 1900s—when settlers began moving here by the thousands and tried to cultivate domestic plants like alfalfa, corn, barley, and wheat—that the arid climate of central and eastern Montana posed a problem.

The second development shaping much of today's rural Montana had begun a half-century earlier. In 1862 Congress had passed the first Homestead Act, which gave citizens 160 acres of surveyed government land if they were able to “prove up”: build a house, plant crops, and stay on the land for five years. This federal legislation—which also involved removing Indian tribes—set off a tidal wave of land seekers. Initially, homesteaders settled on the rich soils of the Midwest, which sees abundant rain from warm, moist air moving north from the Gulf of Mexico. But in dry states like Montana, 160 acres usually didn't produce enough grain per acre to make farming worthwhile.

At the time the Great Plains, including eastern Montana, was labeled in maps and schoolbooks as “The Great American



Desert.” No matter, said members of Congress. First they passed bills that funded irrigation projects like those that drew water from the Yellowstone, Milk, and Sun rivers. Then in 1909, the Enlarged Homestead Act doubled the size of a homestead to 320 acres. Especially to poor European immigrants, very few of whom could ever own property in their home countries, the prospect of free land was too good to pass up.

Encouraging the wide-eyed homesteaders were railroads that had recently laid lines across Montana. The Milwaukee Road, Northern Pacific, and Great Northern were eager for people to settle the emerging state. New residents would pay to travel, import goods and supplies, and grow grain to ship to eastern markets. The railroads widely distributed posters and brochures depicting Montana as an agricultural paradise. Federal and state agencies, local chambers of commerce, and other civic booster groups published ads and flyers promoting free land in “lush, fertile” Montana.

HOPE AND HEARTBREAK

With visions of Montana's fruited plains, thousands of people flocked to the Treasure State. Between 1909 and 1919 more than 82,000 homesteaders filed claims on 25 million acres. They came from states like Missouri, Pennsylvania, and Minnesota and as far as Scandinavia, the British Isles, Germany, and Russia.

Many arrived at newly built towns growing around rail depots built every 15 miles along tracks to provide water for steam engines.

As luck—both good and bad—would have it, starting in 1909 eastern Montana entered a rainy period just as homesteaders were pouring in. For several years, counties that averaged 8 inches of rain per year received twice that. Newly planted fields of grain looked as green and lush as the railroad posters promised. Immigrants wrote to



In this 1909 Edward S. Curtis photo, Indigenous men on horses drag travois past an encampment in eastern Montana. For thousands of years, people lived in this dry region, hunting bison and harvesting native vegetation adapted to the semi-arid landscape.



Articles, posters, and flyers in the early 1900s produced by government agencies, railroads, and local boosters touted Montana as a fertile land of plenty. A series of rainy years starting in 1909 seemed to substantiate the claim. Then came two decades of drought.

and low commodity prices hit farmers throughout Montana. But the floodplain farmland in the state’s western one-third was more fertile and the rain more generous, allowing more homesteaders and successive generations there to make it through the tough times.

East of the Divide, however, many newly formed towns shrank or even disappeared as residents packed up and left.

MACHINES REPLACE PEOPLE

The third major development depopulating rural areas was advances in machinery like combines and log harvesters that do the work of multiple skilled laborers. With specialized seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides, Montana’s 27,000 farms today produce twice as much grain as the 58,000 farms operating at the peak in 1920—but with a fraction of the agricultural workforce.

Evidence of boom-and-bust cycles and agricultural mechanization is especially visible along eastern Montana highways. Abandoned rail lines and grain elevators. Towns that no longer exist except as names on old railway maps. Vacant one-room schoolhouses.

Not everyone was forced off their farm. Combinations of smarts, luck, and inner fortitude allowed many farmers to survive—and even thrive—through droughts and fluctuating grain and energy prices. One Chouteau County farmer-rancher summed up his family’s perseverance: “I think Dad was just more determined to make it work than his neighbors were.”

Many of those who survived diversified their crops, sometimes adding cattle or sheep to their operations. Others bought their neighbors’ farms at foreclosure sales to expand their holdings, having learned that even 320 acres in eastern Montana was not the same as 320 acres in Iowa. Many changed farming techniques to better suit the dry climate, letting fields lie fallow in alternating years, planting soil-holding cover crops, using no-till planting, and drilling wells or running pumps and water lines to irrigate dryland.

More than anything, they recognized

family members urging them to come at once and stake their claim. Montana, they exclaimed, was a farmer’s dream come true.

Then, in 1917, the rain stopped.

By the fall of 1918, drought gripped all of eastern and central Montana. In 1919 it extended as far west as the Bitterroot and Flathead valleys. Farmers who had been getting 25 bushels of grain per acre now were harvesting less than 3 bushels. To make matters worse, the end of World War I caused grain prices to collapse starting in 1918.

Of the 82,000 immigrants who came to Montana to homestead, 70,000 left before

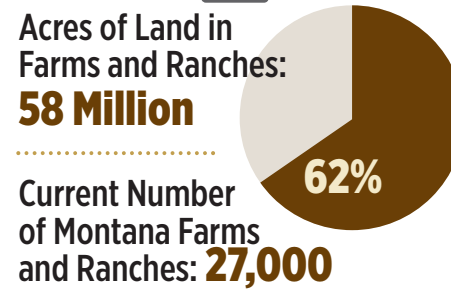
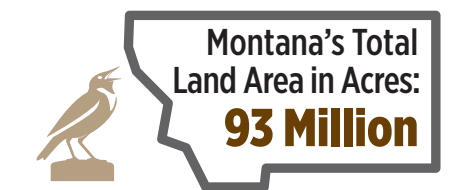
1925. Montana was the only state in the entire country to lose population between 1920 and 1930.

From 1919 to 1925, roughly 11,000 farms were vacated, 20,000 mortgages were foreclosed, and half the state’s banks failed, erasing the life savings of thousands of Montanans. All this came before the Crash of 1929, the Dust Bowl, and the Great Depression that hit Montana along with the rest of the country in the 1930s.

Many farms west of the Divide suffered, too, though not to the same extent. Drought often stretched statewide, and rising costs



Evelyn Cameron photograph of mowing hay at Fiddleback Ranch near Knowlton, 1909. During the 1910s, rain fell abundantly across Montana, creating a false impression of the state’s agricultural potential.



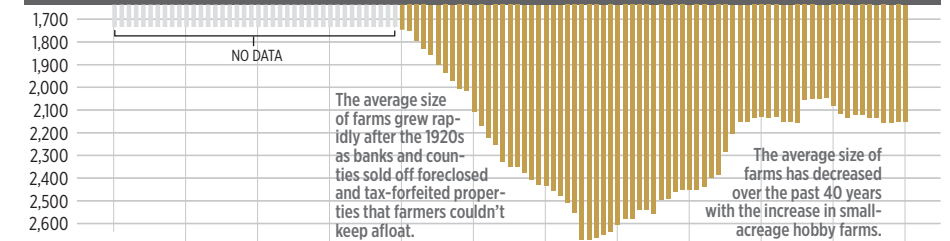
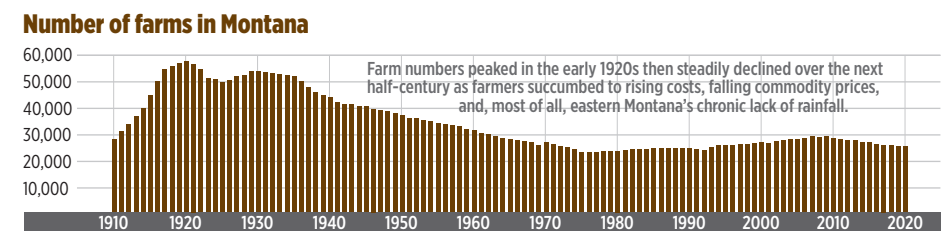
making agriculture Montana’s top industry for total revenue

FROM LEFT: MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY; RED ANTS PANTS



IMAGES: MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Mechanization of logging trees and harvesting crops put thousands of skilled laborers out of work, depopulating towns and schools.



Year	Population
1910	543,000
1920	539,000
1930	558,000
1940	593,000
1950	679,000
1960	694,409
1970	788,752
1980	799,824
1990	903,773
2000	990,730
2010	1,087,211
2020	1,087,211



SOURCES: MONTANA AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS 2021; MACROTRENDS

that, with exceptions like growing organics and specialty crops, farming in the northern Great Plains required ever-larger operations run by fewer people.

Results of that success and grit are also visible today. Boundless fields of wheat and barley. Monumental concrete grain elevators along railways at regional transportation hubs. Expansive herds of cattle. But bigger combines, genetically modified crops that grow in dry or cold conditions, yield-boosting fertilizers, and other advances have come at the expense of local jobs. Montana’s agricultural economy hums along with far fewer laborers and farm owners than in years past.

As a result, most farming communities are shrinking. A century ago, homestead

towns looked like “beads on a string” as one geographer put it, popping up every 15 miles or so along railroad lines. Today, many are empty or nearly so.

Sure, a few larger, regional towns are thriving. That’s where the banks are, the vehicle and agricultural implement dealers, drilling companies, medical facilities, and box stores. But there’s no denying the empty main street furniture stores, clothing emporiums, restaurants, and movie theaters in the small towns between regional hubs.

It’s no one’s fault. That’s just how the economics played out.

A LOVE OF THE LAND

Today the most distinctive thing about rural Montana, other than its panoramic beauty, is the lack of people amid all that open space. Montana is the fourth-largest state in the nation yet has fewer residents than 42 other states. On some remote county roads and highways, you can drive an hour without passing another vehicle or seeing a mailbox.

Even so, rural Montanans are trying to find ways to reinvigorate their towns, lure young families to their communities, encourage new businesses and industries, and give their kids hope for the future.

Their efforts hold promise, if the histories, operations, and features of the state’s working landscapes highlighted in this issue of

Montana Outdoors are any guide. Over the years, many families and communities have survived and overcome hardship caused by drought, technological changes, and economic stagnation. The very presence of rural Montanans today is proof of what’s possible when you combine perseverance, cooperation, and a deep love of the land.



Founded in 2006 in White Sulphur Springs, population 2,170, Red Ants Pants clothing brand produces rugged apparel designed for women who work outdoors. Business proceeds fund a charitable foundation, and the company sponsors the annual Red Ants Pants Music Festival. The four-day festival features major country and Americana musicians, attracts up to 15,000 spectators, and injects millions of dollars into the regional economy each summer.