from Rock Salt: A Memoir

Donald Anderson

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Fifty years and the picture sticks: my father sweeping icicles from the eaves with a broom: something I see myself doing today—if I were to do it—with a two-iron. But it's 1959, and my father's plying with a broom. What's more, it's the night before Christmas in Butte, Montana, where the miners are on strike, and here's my long-legged father, knocking on ice. The broom's straw doesn't give because it's stiff. My father has jerked the broom from a snowbank beside the carport—the carport he'd built the summer before, with salvaged 4x4 posts and corrugated Fiberglas. When it rains, or if snow melts, water sluices from wherever a nail has been hammered overhead, from the spidered cracks. The Fiberglas is a mint green that tints sun.

My father is sweeping icicles because we are making ice cream. It's damned cold, which is not the way I would have put it then. When I was a kid in Butte, winter temperatures often fell to 30, 40, even 50 below. It's cold and my father and I are in our sheepskins and lined buckle-up overshoes. In places, the snow is at our knees. When the icicles snap, they drop with intent. My father has told me to Stand Back. Pay Attention. Stay Tuned.

I stood back all right, and checked the street. What if somebody saw? What would anyone think of us making ice cream after dark in the dead of winter? And if we were going to do that, why couldn't we drive to a gas station to buy block ice? We have ice, my father said. We'll knock icicles off the eaves. Perhaps it was best, for we'd have driven to the gas station in the 1949 two-tone—black-and-white—Hudson Hornet my father had cut with an axe and a hacksaw into what he thought passed as a half-ton pickup. After he'd removed the back seat to connect the space with the trunk, he folded the roof to contain the front seat. He got it started, then rammed it like a fullback or pulling guard. Help me, he said. Stop standing.

He hacked a hole for a Plexiglas rear window and metal-screwed everything as tight as he could. During winter, the heater had to hump to keep the cab heated. The finishing touch was quarter-inch sheet metal welded to the frame for the truck bed. There was no tailgate. My sunk vision of normalcy had been to pack Twinkies and Wonder Bread into my school lunch box and to not ride in
a half-assed truck. What I took in my lunchbox was homemade bread—home-cracked wheat—bulk carrots and apples my father bought then kept fresh by storing them in sand in the cellar. I'd seen pickups with tailgates that hinged flat to open and to extend the bed. I fancied my uncle's pickup, the word FORD embossed on the zinc-gray steel. The tailgate was unmarked, as if it had never been touched or opened. Uncle Ken had threaded the tailgate chains with lengths of garden hose to prevent them from rattling and from nicking the paint.

My job is to carry the downed ice, like shot-gunned grouse, to the porch where my father will stuff what I bring into a canvas bag, then crush it with the flat of an axe—the same dulled axe he'd made a truck with. I get an image of unfrozen grouse being flattened in the bag to feathers and mush. The bag is coarse canvas, an ore bag from the Lexington mine where he works. My father brought home ore bags the way office workers bring home new pens or doctors sample analgesics.

My father, Donald Arthur Anderson, won't let me swing the axe, though he tells me to bring him more ice. You're just standing, he says. If your hands weren't covered, they'd be in your pockets. He's working in the cold with cloth gloves. Monkey Grips, he calls them. They are a fuzzy-yellow felt with rubber fingers—or, more exactly, the fingers sport rubber dots. Sometimes my father will don the right-handed glove to open a jar that's resisting. I'm wearing his mittens. They are dark leather with real wool inside, like our coats. Where the ice has dropped, I have to dig in the snow. When I bring the ice, my father jams it into the canvas then bats it with the axe.

I add rock salt as my father turns the crank. When he's not looking, I stick a piece in my mouth. The crystals look like ice or soiled diamonds, but they taste like salt and mud. I get to turn the crank while my father adds ice. I can feel the mixture stiffen. The ice cream maker is constructed of hoary wood, a small barrel, the bound slats like a Cape Cod shed. The pail holds a metal cylinder for the goop and sterilized wooden paddles that are locked in by a lid and a locking crank. Two-thirds the way up the side of the pail is a drilled hole my father has enlarged for the salted ice to drain.

Before long, I can't turn the crank, even with two hands, and my father finishes up. In the house, he extracts the paddles, hands me a spoon, sets me up at the sink. When my sisters look cheated, he informs them that I have done the work and deserve it. Sullenly, my sisters dice up the canned peaches with elk-bone handled steak knives while I scrape and tongue the paddles. My father stirs the peaches into the ice cream then puts the concoction into the freezer. He wants us to go in to sit by the tree. I take a last lick at the paddles.

In the living room, my father publicizes that we are old enough to hear what a strike means. He looks tired, but it's important to him that we understand that
he is part of management and not labor, though he’s the only one in the room who pursues the difference. That is, he says, he’s a salaried man, and not a man who shows up—drunk or sober—in the rustling line to hope for a job for the day. The reason, he says, is because he has had two years of college. He next advances the point that I will get four years of college and a stamped diploma. He informs my sisters that he will, when the time arrives, spring for a year of college at a Mormon school, Ricks or Snow College, maybe BYU. One year, he repeats. Plenty of time to corral a husband. But you, he says to me, now pointing, it’s the full four years. He tells me I may have to get a job to do it. I tell him I can get a job at the mine. That’s fine, he says, you’ll have to.

At the time, I’m 13, and my sisters are 14 and younger. My baby brother is six. In 40 years, he’ll be dead, and it will be alcohol that will take him. My brother James Arthur II, named for my grandfather, will not attend college. He’ll spend some time in the Army and in prison. He’ll become a diesel mechanic and a master welder, his specialty custom horse trailers. He was a horseman, too, who supplemented his income by breaking broncos. He was 17 when I first saw him handle a rough mount. The performance made me think of words like id, bygone, Hun. The mare’s flanks were roweled bloody and the specialized bit split flesh. It was all clotting blood and froth and lather.

Later, AWOL from the Army and jailed in Alberta for having beaten senseless a lawman—an off-duty RCMP—Jim, released from prison, rode a horse from Alberta to Sante Fe, where he sold the beast. He had named the horse “Junction” and would produce photos of the animal the way someone else might produce a photo of a boat or new patio, a picture window that has been installed. Jim will drink daily, and most of the day. In time, he’ll bilk my father out of half of my father’s life savings—that nest egg reported to me as $22,000 dollars, the set-aside amount my father had amassed during 40 years of strain. Jim will visit me in Colorado the year before he dies, but on Christmas Eve 1959, he is a six-year-old who has just started school.

My father gets back to the business of the mine strike, now five months in duration. He, a salaried man, is on half pay. The miners, by contrast, are unemployed. Nonetheless, he says, we—our family—have had to stretch, gesturing at what I think he means us to see as the roof of our house, the electric lights that burn, the heat rushing from the vents above the furnace. He does everything except rub his stomach. From time out of mind, he has told us stories of his father and the Great Depression. We were never hungry, he says. We had lousy clothes, but we ate. My father saw to it. So. My father points at us. We are blessed, he confirms. Ordering us to our knees, and using his chair as a prop, he prays his 1959 Christmas prayer about the wise men and the baby Jesus and all the angels and the animals around the smelly manger. We had a cow and a barn.
I knew what that was like. Around a barn, sterile straw is not easy to come by.

Mother passes out ornaments and tinsel, and we trim the tree. For a while I hang the tinsel a strand at a time. I even straighten out some of my sisters' work. Later, I just throw clumps at the branches above me. Before we go to bed, my mother serves home-baked cinnamon rolls and cocoa. The icing melts and slides off as if the buns are sun-fried fenders. Prior to dessert, my father reads the Christmas story as it appears in the Gospel According to Luke. He doesn't like the version in Matthew, says: Matthew was a legalistic Jew. My father contends that Luke writes more like a poet, which stumps me some because my father's poet is Robert Service, and his Service favorite, "The Cremation of Sam McGee." When he's done with Luke, we ask for Sam, and my father, who knows the poem by heart, delivers. His delivery is peppy, with the usual punch at the end:

There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who moil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was the night on the marge of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee.

My mother plays "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" on the piano. I like the song better than the Bible story, but I don't say it. To consider the piano as a piece of furniture is to know that the case is roughed up but that my mother kept the instrument more than passably tuned. She, herself, had perfect pitch and her voice was the sweetest alto. It has been 40 years since I have heard her sing. I have no idea where the bruised upright came from or where it went. When I returned home for my father's funeral, the piano was gone, replaced by some sort of contraption featuring selections with computerized percussion. I almost unplugged it.

On Christmas morning 1959, my sisters and baby brother and I each receive an orange and wrapped books. Some friends of our parents have donated their grown children's library. I get the entire Bomba the Jungle Boy set. Christmas night, for dessert, we eat the peach-laced ice cream.

The labor strike is to drag on. My father, a Mormon Bishop, turned to his church. From a special catalog, my mother orders clothes, sturdy shoes and canned meat. In a central room of our dug-out cellar there are plenty of canned beets and green beans and peaches. Rice, pinto beans, hard winter wheat, and a
grinder. There's an opened box of bullets, matches, bottles of aspirin, and Vitamin C.

We had a cow, too, an old Guernsey, kept in a bathroom-sized pen with a bathroom-sized shed in the backyard. The cow's name was Pet. When I milked Pet, she would swing her shit-dirtied tail. Pet's tail was a redhead's tresses that would encircle my neck and face, my ears and mouth. The idea I had was to shave the tail. Problem solved, I sat to milk. When Pet swung her tail, the rope of it nearly knocked me deaf. For a while, I wore earmuffs and goggles.

Pet didn't produce much milk, but what milk she produced was rich, and I sold cream to neighbors for 50 cents a pint. In the cellar next to the freezer, my father set up the hand-cranked separating machine. When I'd filtered and separated the milk and cream, I'd haul the equipment to the kitchen to clean it with soap and boiled water.

At the time my father purchased, in the late '40s, the house in which I was to be raised, he did so without consulting my mother. After my father's death in 1993, my mother confessed that when she first saw the place she'd wept. "I cried and cried," she said, "it was such a shack." Previously, we'd lived upstairs from my father's parents—his father a legendary, though savaged drunk, and his mother an abusive taxicab dispatcher. My mother, Zola Maxine Stevenson, and my father had wed on New Year's Eve, 1943. The wedding had been planned for New Year's Day, but my father, ever practical, married the day before, realizing the advantage of a full year's tax break.

My father's best friend Sidney had died at Pearl Harbor two years prior. My father had tried to join up, but had been denied enlistment because of a childhood mishap in his father's wood yard that had blinded one eye. My father had wanted to join the Navy before the attack on Pearl Harbor, explaining that if he and Sidney had been able to enlist together, they could have asked to be assigned to the same ship. Whatever would have happened to my father on board Sidney's ship would have happened more than four years before my birth.

When, in the '70s, I was commissioned as an Air Force officer, my father couldn't attend the ceremony, but he made sure to telephone long-distance. The commissioning seemed more important to him than to me. I had joined the Air Force to avoid the walking tour of Vietnam, as my draft lottery number in 1970 had surfaced as #1. I had considered hightailing it to Canada, but with a wife and a year-old daughter, I did not.

In 1941, my father had an official armed forces deferment. He went to work in Butte's copper mines. When he called about my Air Force commissioning, he had some information: Because of the war, the U.S. faced a copper shortage. To have copper for bullets, they minted Lincoln pennies out of steel. The war
required copper. So, he said. Then: So.

Following my father’s death, one of my dreams was about those pennies. In 1943, the mints in Philadelphia, Denver, and San Francisco struck approximately a billion steel pennies, freeing up copper for munitions. When my father said So, I was supposed to acknowledge his contribution to the war effort. I did not do that. After the war, my father worked an additional 30 years in the Anaconda Company’s—and then ARCO’s—copper mines and lead smelters. Who will give him due?

My father was a believer. That he was a devout Mormon, and the son of a failed one, was the thread of his cloth, the color his wool was dyed. Early on, I thought of him as armored.

The chink I first recall was Sunday television. I was nine or ten when T.V. (and its three channels) arrived in Butte. The fat blond cabinet black-and-white seemed to pulse, even when switched off. Given a choice I would have watched something—anything—every night. But in our house, homework and storybooks reigned, and Sabbath viewing was forbidden. One way or another, though, my father heard about the new Western “Gunsmoke.” As it turned out, my father’s edict was subject to waiver. “Gunsmoke” became a long-running Sunday appointment, a sanctioned family event.

Though my father promoted James Arness and his unwincing manliness as Marshal Matt Dillon, it seemed to me, even at my unperturbed age, that my father, although drawn to Dillon’s qualities, was in love over his head with Miss Kitty. My young father was a breast man, a preference only aggravated when my mother later lost hers to a double mastectomy. She had been what was called, in those days of industrial bras, a sweater girl. In a photograph I recall, the wool features a moose and pine trees.

If it was my sisters who named our old Guernsey Pet, it was my father who named our new cow: Marilyn. As in Monroe. He kept a pin-up calendar in his bureau’s top drawer. The twelve months confirmed a penchant for chests and black-mesh nylons. Old Pet had been put down and my father bought a two-acre field across from our house. The Silver Bow creek ran through the field. Encircled by barbed wire, the two acres featured a tin-sided shed and a manger. It was Marilyn’s kingdom. Marilyn was a Holstein whose milk volume quadrupled Pet’s—her cream, however, not nearly as rich. To run Marilyn’s milk through the separator was hardly worth it, and I wouldn’t have done it were it not for my father’s love of cream on his Corn Flakes and the possibility of a neighbor’s 50 cents.

Sunday was church day. Early morning was the service for men only, followed by Sunday School for all. The later afternoon was tied up for a final ser-
vice, another combination gathering. After dinner we'd assemble for "Gunsmoke." We came to know Doc Adams, the gimp-legged Chester, Festus, and even Burt Reynolds as the half-breed Quint. A child and survivor of the Great Depression, a willing boxer, a miner and woodsman, a reliable citizen, an ungrumbling husband and father, my father admired dependable men. He admired Marshal Dillon, but he didn't seem to comprehend Dillon's on-screen discretion. He was certain Matt and Kitty were sleeping together. As a man who invited my mother for scheduled weekend naps behind a locked bedroom door, from which he emerged refreshed, often singing, I doubt my father wanted fact or testimony of any coupling, but he may have thought the Marshal should have whistled or hummed. Something.

Butte, Montana—"The Richest Hill on Earth"—was once the largest city between St. Louis and Seattle. In 1867, the peak of the placer boom had the city's population at 500. It halved over the next two years. Then, quartz deposits were discovered. Mining barons, flocking to Butte, became Montana's first millionaires based on silver, then copper. In the 1880s, Butte was the planet's largest copper producer. In 1884, there were over 300 operating mines, 4,000 posted mining claims, 9 quartz mills, and 4 smelters, all operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

In 1899, Marcus Daly merged with Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company to create the Amalgamated Copper Mining Company. By 1910, having bought up the smaller mining companies, Amalgamated changed its name to the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, the largest corporate power in Montana. ACM dominated local politics and all the business that mattered in the state. Through the 1950s, the Company owned every newspaper in Montana.

The Irish came in droves and soon became the city's largest ethnic group—they worked the mines, but also began to dominate local government and policing. Butte's Miners Union formed in 1878, sending the largest delegation to the International Workers of the World's founding convention in Chicago in 1906. Butte became known as the "Gibraltar of Unionism," but worker frustration at the Company's deaf ear to demands led to violence in 1914 and 1917—violence that involved guns, dynamite, Federal troops, and murder.

In 1917, the city's population at a peak of 100,000, 168 men were killed in a mine fire—a fire that remains the worst disaster in U.S. mining annals. A frayed electrical cable being lowered down the main shaft ignited its timber lining. With the Great War clamoring for copper, all of Butte's mines were working at capacity, and the Speculator had nearly half its 2,000 miners below ground when the fire struck, spreading flames down the shaft and into the drifts and crosscuts. That only 168 died was its own kind of miracle, as miners decamped,
more often than not in pitch black, into adjacent mines.

Two years before the Speculator calamity, 16 shift bosses and assistant foremen on the surface for their lunch hour stood around the main shaft of the Granite Mountain mine awaiting the 12:30 whistle to be lowered back underground. Also awaiting descent were twelve cases of 40 percent dynamite. For reasons never unearthed, just as the whistle blew, so did the powder. Fingers, identified by wedding rings, were found more than a mile from the scene. All to say that Butte, as a mining boomtown, was hardly a model of city planning. Streets zigged and streets zagged. Houses collapsed where mines honeycombed beneath, and a whole suburb gave way to the expanding Berkeley Pit.

There were no policies against livestock in Butte. I dreamed of the sheriff coming to our house to tell my father it was illegal to keep cows. I didn't hold out much hope because at school we studied Montana history and I knew there were more cows in my state than people, and my teacher had said that Montana statutes dictated death by hanging for cattle rustling, but not for human murder.

Miss Stephanie, my fifth-grade teacher, whom I loved like my father loved Miss Kitty, was from California. She said San Francisco housed more people than our whole huge state, but then admitted that San Francisco couldn't have penned all the cows. "Your cows" was the way she put it.

It was my job to walk Marilyn to the stockyards. We didn't own a trailer, so, when the cow was to be bred, I walked her there. "Okay. So. Good," my father would say, then drive our truck to the yards. Me? I'd herd the cow—a one-man, one-cow cattle drive.

You want your friends to see you walking a cow to the stockyards to be bred? Okay? You see? You're 16 years old. You live inside the city limits. In a fenced field across the street from your house is a cow your father wants humped. You're driving a cow with a stick in your hand. You're herding a cow with a stick to the stockyards.

Your father has already parked—you spy the truck in the lot (the old Hudson, spray-painted red, cab already peeling). For a moment you think you spy Miss Stephanie's car—the copper DeSoto.

You herd the cow into the corral. The bull is let in. Cowboys materialize and arrange themselves all along and on the corral's top rails. The bull, short-legged, has a hard time reaching. There are jokes. When the bull connects, everyone laughs, so you nod your head, squint. Your father pays someone. You find your stick and start the cow for home. The old girl seems bedazed and druggy. Once a year, Marilyn was bred, and once a year, my father slaughtered a yearling to fill our freezer.
My grandfather on my father’s side, James Arthur Anderson, had been born in Utah, his being born there the consequence of his father’s teen-aged conversion to Mormonism. At 16, great-grandfather Rasmas, following his baptism in Jutland’s River Karup, had been disowned by his Danish clan and had emigrated from Copenhagen, alone, to America and on to Utah, the desert Brigham Young called Zion. At Ellis Island, my great-grandfather’s family name was altered from Andersen to Anderson, because a customs official so willed it. Then the official assigned an initial for a non-existent middle name.

Rasmas X. Anderson hied himself to the lunar landscape of eastern Utah, where in time he spawned my grandfather, who in 1920 witnessed the birth of my father, Donald Arthur. My grandfather, James Arthur, who would defend Mormons if you brought it up, had lapsed early. By the time the Great Depression hit, he was making a living selling whiskey to failed “saints,” as the Mormons called themselves. In my father’s version of his father’s whiskey success, he and his sister Ramona were the only children in Vernal, Utah with new shoes. “We wore our shoes,” he said. “We had them.”

Though he’d built his own still, my grandfather fought off competitors by stealing their hooch and selling it too. He would take my father, hand him a bag of sand. Together they’d sweep through suspected brush or high grasses, casting handfuls. Whenever sand struck glass, they would gather up and haul off the whiskey.

James Arthur liked to box and gamble and be drunk. He’d attended college, where he’d managed a degree in mining engineering from the Colorado School of Mines. During his school years, according to my father, James Arthur held the welterweight boxing championship in Colorado and three adjoining states. What was to put him into the whiskey business was that he’d lost the family ranch in a card game with a judge in Vernal. In my dreams, what my father and grandfather cast to locate jarred hooch is not coarse sand, but rock salt. Clink.

James Arthur was sailing smooth until he expanded deliveries to the Ute Indian reservation. A Mormon Bishop tipped him off that as a consequence of the Indian sales, Federal revenuers were hot on the hunt. James Arthur packed his wife, my father and his sister, into a Model T. My father was under the impression that his father was headed for Canada, but, as he put it: We ran out the last of our fuel in Butte. So.

It was a predictable slide from “Gunsmoke” to “The Ed Sullivan Show.” Though both shows got their starts in 1955, and though both productions lasted years, Ed Sullivan changed America in ways “Gunsmoke” and the Marshal did not. In Butte, there may have been Irish and Finns and Swedes and Czechs. There may have been Poles, Mexicans, Germans, Filipinos, Chinese, Italians, In-
dians, and Welsh miners from West Virginia, but there were no blacks I knew of—none in my schools. What I learned about blacks, I learned from Ed Sullivan on Sundays, after church.

At first, the blacks on the show seemed damaged: Sammy Davis, Jr., who could dance but sported an immobile glass eye after he’d lost his mothered eye in a near-fatal car wreck. And: Ray Charles, who couldn’t see at all, and who swayed when he sang in a way that looked uncurbed and alarmingly chancy. I pictured Ray crooning in his shower, then thwacking through glass.

The black women, though, seemed whole and larger than life: Mahalia Jackson, Pearl Bailey. Or sexy: the Supremes or Horne. Lena Horne. Lena Horne could sing, but unlike Pearl, Mahalia, even Diana, she could dance, and when she sang and danced, it was a flirt with the audience different from what I knew much about. This may have been true for my father too. Following a particular Sunday night set, he turned to note: Pretty good looking . . . for a Negro. What was wrong with what he’d said wasn’t altogether clear to me at my age then, but what I heard in my father’s voice was as much wonder as a cluttered admiration.

Later: You get in a fight with a Negro, watch your wrists. (From where was the Negro he’d fought?) A Negro’s head is hard. Aim for the nose. That said, as far back as I recall, my father was an unbound fan of Joe Louis, the “Brown Bomber” from Detroit. But it was Archie Moore who my father admired most—that wiliness, that heart. My father took it personally when Marciano kayoed Moore. He couldn’t even talk about the fight with Ali, then called Clay. He could about the battle with Yvon Durelle though. Floored three times in the first round in a ring in Montreal, and floored again in the fifth, Moore retained his title with a desolating blow in the 11th round. Archie was 45 at the time. The Canadian fisherman not yet 30.

My father advanced that Moore, with some 200 fights and the most knockouts ever (141!), was dodged for so long that when he first fought for the Light Heavyweight Championship of the World, he was 39 years old. With dread and esteem in his voice, my father said Moore then defended that title for next ten years, the longest period in the division’s history. As a light heavyweight, Moore fought for the Heavyweight Championship twice. And though he was kayoed by Marciano in nine rounds, he dropped the Rock with a sacking right in the second. Moore had begun his boxing career in 1935. At the time he fought Clay in ’62, Archie was 50.

My father told the story that when Sugar Ray Robinson tore apart Carl “Bobo” Olson for the middleweight crown, Moore wired: “Ray—you preached a good sermon, and I think he got the word.” As was the case for any number of my father’s tales, I thought: If this story isn’t true, it should be.
I was 19 in 1965, on my way to France to serve a Mormon Church mission. I had no craving to preach Joseph Smith's invented gospel—didn't want to be a member of my father's church—but I wanted out of Butte, the city of my birth, and France was my ace.

During my time in France, I mostly lived in the Alsace-Lorain, usually in neighborhoods with expatriate Algerians where the rent was cheap. The first dead man I ever saw was an Algerian who'd been stabbed in a brawl and lay on the cobblestones, leaking. The Algerians, who stood about, ignored us—a couple of white kids in black suits, gaping. We were wearing our name tags: Missionaire Mormon.

Despite my church years in France, I, like James Arthur I & II, was to lapse. Not long after I returned to the U.S., I petitioned the church for excommunication. I wanted my name wiped from their lists. I wanted them to stop tracking me down. My father kept forwarding my addresses to Salt Lake.

During the '60s in Butte, the Chamber of Commerce sponsored a "Clean-up, Paint-up, Fix-up" campaign. "Butte is my town—and I like it!" was plastered on beggarly billboards all over the city. The town I was raised in, and invoked to like, produced more copper than any other collection of mines in the U.S. of A. The town produced Evel Knievel and the defunct Berkeley Pit, an expanse that Robert Craig Knievel, even in his greenest youth, would not have attempted to clear. The rising groundwater in this, the nation's deepest abandoned pit, is so poisonous with dissolved metal concentrations that ducks or geese, landing in its inviting mile-deep shining, die. Loudbspeakers blare recorded shotgun blasts to discourage the fowl. Studying the pit, you will see the moored skiff used to net migratory carcasses, for the loudspeakers have not proven particularly convincing. According to my father, who'd worked his final years in the Berkeley Pit, the dead ducks and geese are burned on the spot.

Three Heavyweight Boxing Champions: John L. Sullivan, himself, as well as Jim Jeffries and Bob Fitzsimmons all fought bouts in Butte. Aside from recording the lowest winter temperature (-61° F) in the contiguous United States, Butte is the place where J. Edgar Hoover is reputed to have assigned FBI agents who nettled him.

The Berkeley Pit's heavy metal water is rising at a rate of 5,000 gallons per minute, 7.2 million gallons per day. Situated above much of Butte's population, the Berkeley Pit has a current water depth of some 5,200 feet, the same depth the shaft was sunk at the Mountain Con, where I had been employed as a miner. The critical level—that is, the depth at which general flooding will occur—is 5,410 feet. In 1987, with a focus on the Berkeley Pit (and its rising tide), the en-
tire Butte mining district was visited by the Environmental Protection Agency. As a consequence, the combination of "The Richest Hill on Earth" and the Silver Bow Creek flowing down the Clark Fork drainage was named the largest Superfund site in U.S. history, covering, as it does, some 100 miles in length. It is no longer the river Lewis and Clark committed to memory.

I didn't miss Butte when I lived in France. There were too many distractions, not the least of which was the French language itself that, for the longest time, sounded to me like static electricity. No, the first time I missed Butte was when the Air Force assigned me to Strategic Air Command Headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska. I'd lived the most of my life at the base of the Continental Divide along the knuckled spine of the Rockies, where the sun rose from behind and set upon peaks. In Nebraska, the sun didn't know where to be.

In 1978, my father called from Butte to tout that the Mormon Church would now permit black men to be ordained into the priesthood. Until now, blacks could be baptized and pay tithes, but their full participation was restricted. In the Mormon hierarchical patriarchy, blacks had heretofore held no positions of authority, nor had they been allowed into the "sacred" temples.

My father had called, certain that the Church's incorporation of blacks would sway my return to the fold.

"As of today, blacks are, of a sudden, acceptable?"
"No—as of June 1st," my father said.
"You mean God has caved in the face of the NAACP?"
"What do you mean?"
"You're telling me the prophet has had a revelation about blacks?" Then: "Like Brigham Young did about plural marriage?"
"It was Wilford Woodruff who put a halt to polygamy—and, yes, he received a revelation. He was the prophet at the time!"
"Okay," I said, "so it was Woodruff who had the revelation about the time Federal troops were due to arrive to start jailing high church officials. Polygamy was against the law, Dad. Why shouldn't we recognize a difference between divine decree and political expediency?"
"I thought you'd be happy about the Negroes," he said. "I am. Yes, I am."
"I am too," I said. "Now BYU can get some running backs." I was sorry the minute I said it.

For me, growing up, the Mormon doctrine, as I understood it, was that blacks were black as a consequence of the cursing of Cain. The poison notion was that, having murdered his brother Abel, Cain was struck with a blackened skin so that any who found him would know not to kill him (God meaning for
Cain to suffer a long and harried life). One of Noah's sons, Ham, then married a daughter of Cain. From that marriage sprang, in Joseph Smith's words, "a race which preserved the curse in the land."

In the Church's Book of Mormon, white skin is taught as the preferred hue. According to Smith and his book, "Lamanites" (or Native Americans) are said to be cursed with a darker skin because of sin and disobedience. Long before the arrival of Columbus, "righteous" whites warred with their darker-skinned brethren. Eventually the whites (called "Nephites") fell into their own sinful ways and were slaughtered by the Lamanites. Moroni (who these days adorns in golden form and trumpet to lips most Mormon temples worldwide) was, by his own account, 400 years after the coming and going of Christ, the last righteous white man standing in the Americas.

Spencer W. Kimball, the prophet on watch when blacks were admitted to the priesthood was, as well, a booster of the Indian Placement Program, wherein "Lamanites" from reservations were placed into white Mormon foster homes. He pronounced on the subject: "I saw a striking contrast in the progress of the Indian people today as against that of only fifteen years ago. Truly the scales of darkness are falling from their eyes, and they are fast becoming a white and delightful people."

In a New World twist, Joseph Smith declared that The Book of Mormon, an abridged history of the people of the Americas covering a thousand years (B.C. 600-A.D. 400), had been engraved upon hammered gold sheets, rather than on the Old World's clay or papyrus. In Mormon lore, this alleged recorded history became known as the Golden Plates, and Joseph Smith as the latter-day prophet to whom they were delivered.

The earlier prophet Moroni guarded, then buried the Golden Plates, only to return in angel form in a heavenly visitation to Joseph Smith in upstate New York in 1823. Four years later—the same year Beethoven passed—the Angel Moroni released the Golden Plates to the entrepreneurial Smith. As you may have guessed, the Golden Plates, translated by young Joseph into The Book of Mormon, were, translation complete, returned to Moroni and the heavens.

Smith claimed to have employed two translucent stones or crystals to translate the ancient tongue. These stones, affixed to a breastplate so Smith could gaze through them at the Golden Plates were named Urim and Thummin, after their predecessors in the Old Testament. But as a kid, Urim and Thummin sounded to me like something out of Tolkien. My father read to us from The Hobbit, a book he'd encountered as a teenager. He liked stories about dwarves and goblins and wizards. And so did we. At the time, Golden Plates and seer-stones made perfect sense to me. As did otherworldly personages appearing in blinding light.
My father remained a Mormon and a miner. As copper prices fell and foreign competition broadened and the rich veins petered out, a concentration plant was built and virtually all shaft mining halted with operations moving to the low-grade ore production of the Berkeley Pit. Begun in the mid-'50s, the Berkeley Pit was to become the largest open pit mining site in America. During the first 20 years of its operation, over 700 million tons of dirt were removed. Workers were digging out almost 300,000 tons of earth a day with 46,000 tons being ore with an average ore grade of less than one percent. Eventually, 200-ton trucks were being loaded with four scoops of a 22-yard shovel basket. The tires on one of these trucks, as my father put it, were the height of a basketball hoop and the width of an outstretched Wilt Chamberlain. Wilt the Stilt they called him, he told me, as if I wouldn't know. For my four years of high school and for the next two as well, Wilt the Stilt led the NBA in scoring, including a career-high 50.4 points per game in 1962. That same year, in the greatest performance of offense ever, Wilt single-handedly scored 100 points against the New York Knicks in a game played in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

My grandfather James Arthur climbed into a ring in the Butte Civic Center during the Great Depression. He had challenged a professional in a winner-take-all affair. "Dixie" LaHood was a regional tough who'd beaten a world champ in a non-title fight. My grandfather, stripped to the waist and in his work pants, came back from a beating and knocked LaHood on his heels. Ass-over-teakettle was the way my father put it. A hat had been passed before the fight. James Arthur fisted the cash and walked home with my father, who'd beheld every punch of the ruckus.

When I was 11, my father was head sampler at the Lexington mine. His day crew brought ore samples to the surface to be assayed. Based on the findings, the mining superintendent would determine whether and where to continue to blast and to drill.

There was a mining engineer who would stomp through my father's office with his night crew. This engineer had taken to sitting in my father's chair and propping his cruddy boots on the desk. My father told him if he did this again he was going to knock him to the floor. I'd heard my father set forth the situation to my mother.

My father worked Saturdays at the mine, above ground, for half days. It was the day he did his paperwork. I often tagged along. Dad would pack us baloney and sweet pickle sandwiches on cracked wheat bread, smeared with butter. In my father's office, I'd fiddle with ore samples (I'd assembled a labeled collection in an egg carton for a Cub Scout badge), and sharpen pencils. Sometimes, my
father would let me wash up his respirators in a big sink and install clean filters. I'd draw with my father's drafting tools.

The Saturday I'm writing about, we entered the office to the engineer in my father's chair with his feet on the desk. When my father kicked the castored chair, the engineer and his elevated feet crashed to the floor. My father jutted his chin toward the slime on his desk, then handed the man a pair of red boxing gloves. He had removed two pair from his desk's bottom drawer. It took me a few years to understand that my father worked in a place where boxing gear was essential. Whatever the case, he educated the engineer that Saturday at the Lexington, conducting a clinic in fisticuffs. Right away he landed one on the nose—a quick flick with his shoulder behind it. And if the snapped nose hadn't diluted the big man's starch, what my father next did to his ribs did. Can you see the engineer inching his paws and elbows toward his bleeding face, exposing the gut? I saw it. The clinic was almost over before it started. Everything my sweet-tempered father did was exact and quick and vicious.

In 1962, I tried to quit high school to work in a car wash a pal of my father's owned. I'd wanted to work in the mines for the money to be made there, but hadn't yet aged the required 18 years. My father promised he'd help me get on at the Mountain Con where he was now the safety engineer after I graduated from Butte High. I'd wanted to go to work to buy a car. I had my eye on a 1947 Pontiac Silver Streak, the two-door. My father said I couldn't quit school. He said I could drive the Hudson.

In 1964, my father got me work at the Mountain Con. One of my first jobs was helping a contract miner (those who were paid for the volume of ore they moved) whose partner hadn't shown for work the day after payday. I'd stood that day in the rustling line and was hired for a pre-determined day's pay of 21 dollars. I went to work with the miner, mucking out a stope that had been drilled and blasted the shift before. In a shaft mine, what you might call a tunnel is called a drift. Stopes (pronounced with a long o, like stove) slanted off vertically mined shafts called raises. Stopes followed the ore veins, because shaft mining is about the removal of high-grade ore.

Our mucking machine, like everyone's, powered by hydraulics, was a scoop—a steel bucket on cables and pulleys rock-bolted into the face of the stope. When the cable snapped, my partner and I dragged it, like road kill, to the tracks where we lay it on one of the ore car steel rails. Here, he meant to trim the frayed ends in order to re-splice them. My partner knelt by the rail and arranged the heavy snake. I handed him the axe.

I was asking questions and, in the process of answering me and trimming the cable, the man lopped off his left index finger. It was a powerful swing and
a clean cut, just shy of the knuckle, toward the wrist. The man removed his
glove to stanch the bloody pump. He didn't shriek when the axe fell, and he
didn't squawk when he removed the glove to observe the result. He wrapped the
wound with shirt cloth he'd torn away with one swift move with his good right
hand. When he'd finished, he looked up from where he kneeled. Shit, he mур-
murred, then rose to stand in his half shirt. He could have been a statue, a bronze
man in a helmet, a hero, an actor in a movie starring Victor Mature.

I stooped to retrieve the digit. It was still in its little glove case, like a gift
jackknife. I headed for the station, where a massive box constructed of lagging
(rough cut 2x8s) housed coils of pipe through which water flowed for drinking,
for drilling, and for quelling dust. Each morning, on each level of the mine (we
were on the 5200 level, a mile deep) block ice was shipped down and dumped
into these boxes to chill water.

With the axe, I chopped on a block for enough ice to fill my upturned hard-
hat. I removed the finger from the glove, then covered it with ice. I caught myself
scanning for rock salt.

At the station, we rang for the cage. My father, in his role as safety engineer,
arrived with the shift boss. He transferred the finger and ice to his hat. My
partner, my father, the shift boss, and the iced bone and flesh were hoisted to the
surface. My father had congratulated me for thinking of ice. He called me Don­
nie in front of the men.

I reattached my lamp to my hardhat and headed back to the stope and its
cable. There were ice chunks caught in the hardhat webbing. I stuck two pieces
in my mouth as I worked my way up the drift. I ate lunch and waited for the shift
to while by. Although the Mountain Con wasn't the hottest on the hill—the
Stewart was—temperatures at 5200 feet were generally in the 90s. Despite just
sitting, I was sweating when I saw light approaching. I first guessed it was my
father coming to check on me, but it was my partner. His finger had been reat­
tached. Without mentioning the stitching, he walked me through resplicing the
cable, and we went back to work with me operating the mucking machine, add­
ing to the ore we'd already removed. In the middle of it all, I shot him a look.
Didn't want to miss the shift, he said. He held the ungloved hand in front, as if
to know where it was. The bandage shone conclusively white in our lamplight.

My father retired from mining in the '80s, about the time the sump pumps
were cut off in the shafts and the Berkeley Pit closed, the now unpumped, metal-
laden water beginning to seep in. Though all with their starts in the '50s, the
Berkeley Pit had a lengthier run than either "Gunsmoke" or Ed Sullivan. Had
my father noticed? Was he aware that Miss Kitty had preceded him in death,
that she'd died from complications from AIDs she may have contracted during
a trip to interior Africa? Amanda Blake, except for Arness and Milburn Stone, made the most appearances during "Gunsmoke's" 20-year run. As of this writing, James Arness, three years my father's junior, remains very much alive and will answer email sent to his personal website: JamesArness.com.

Donald Arthur Anderson is interred in Butte. On his gravestone, his John Henry (as he would have said) is shortened to Don A. Anderson, the way he signed his name. I returned to Colorado to a letter posted three days before the day my father died.

Dec 8, 1993

Merry Xmas. We will put our tree up tomorrow. Your mother is going with me today to buy one. It's been quite cold here, but it's warmed up some. I can still start all my cars without plugging them in. Yesterday, it's been 52 years since my pal Sidney's boat sunk. How could I still miss him? I do. We have a new carpet in our kitchen, bath, and back porch. Our upright freezer finally gave up—we had to get a new one. We have 2-refrigerators, 2-freezers, 2-microwaves, 4-TVs, 4-phones. I think we are pretty well equipped, don't you?

—All love.

P.S. I've got to do something about the carport.

I couldn't help but see the carport, its paled Fiberglas, except for the nail holes, so fiercely resisting weather, moths, rust, time, chronic time. This manufactured product had outlasted my old man. I'd thought his shelf life would have pressed on, like Fiberglas, or gold, or copper, Styrofoam, sealed Twinkies, MoonPies, the sproutable wheat found in the tombs of Pharaohs. The Fiberglas, even finding its way to Butte's landfill, would outlast me too. My father admired efficiency and made persistent use of the materials at hand. On the day he died, he brewed up four heart attacks in fourteen hours. He had a job to do, and he did it.

In 1976, Atlantic Richfield Company, then the 8th largest oil company in the country, bought out the long-standing ACM. In 1985, Montana Resources, a local state concern, bought 40,000 acres of Butte mining property from ARCO, who'd shut down operations as unprofitable. In Butte, mining has been "temporarily suspended" due to the cost of deregulated electricity and collapsed copper prices—these days, the nation able to get low-balled copper for its bullets elsewhere. When Montana Resources suspended operations, there were a few over
300 employees. A far cry from 1903, when Butte claimed the largest payroll on the planet: 12,000 men in the mines and mills pocketing $1,500,000 monthly.

I keep a photograph in my office at the United States Air Force Academy, where I teach. The photograph stands on a credenza beneath where my diploma from Cornell University hangs. When I went back to school at 42, my father said, "Are you? Why?" A boy from Butte in New York City was what he thought. In the photograph, my father wears his hardhat and lamp, bib overalls and a long-sleeved shirt, the right sleeve of which, for some reason, has been sheared at the elbow. His sampling hammer dangles from his belt. He's wearing safety glasses and his Timex. His steel-toed rubber boots and pant legs are slimed. His right arm rests shoulder high on part of a dismantled hydraulic drill. The scene is well lighted. There are five-gallon cans of Texaco lubricant. When I look at the photo, what I think is: There are boxing gloves in his desk, bottom drawer.