

Alan Hoffmann

Montana Shape Poem

*The author investigates
some of his questions about
Montana and identity
through poetry.*

What can define a state? Is it the people? If so, which people? Is it the people who have farmed the land for generations, making it their own? Is it the newcomers looking for a home? Is it the Natives who have been here centuries? Which features make up a state? Define it by the mountains, towering menacingly over the land, daring to break up the endless big sky. Steep fortresses, looming eternally, unbothered by the very passage of wind and rain and time. Define it by the grasslands that go on without end. The wind catching grass to create waves, a subtle reminder of the vast inland oceans that once swept over this place. A place at the whims of the weather but is no less permanent. Define it by the forests. An endless green maze, smelling of pine. Acres of woodland, full of giants that give life to birds, mammals, and insects. Haunted by giants who gave their lives for people and towns in order to build this place. Maybe a state should be defined by what lies beneath the surface. Copper, silver, gold, and oil. A bounty in the Earth. Never ceasing veins that bring never ceasing joy and riches. At least that is the story, spun to the down-trodden. Or is a state a connection of farms and ranches? Fields of wheat, corn, barley and sugar beets. Where herds of cattle and sheep graze, while the cattlemen and sheep herders plot against one another, fighting over precious grass. Is a state defined by history? Are we made up of pioneers and homesteaders working tirelessly to make the land their own. Do the echoes of the miners tunneling into mountains define us? Is it the soldiers fighting the Indian Wars? Is a state merely a collection of people? Made up of a few scattered cities and countless small towns, the tentative connection of highway the only thing linking them together. Are we more like our cities? Are we more like our towns? Is a state the sum of its economy? Exports of ores and agricultures, power to run and feed a nation. The imports of tourism, showing off our splendor to those who want to see our parks? Is a state simply a collection of dollar signs? If not the economy, then what stats could, should define a state? Is it the stats showing a state in the top ten in terms of happiness, however you define that, or the stats showing the same state with one of the highest suicide rates? Maybe a state is a strict population count. No matter the race or creed of those people, if they reside within the borders, they are the state. They can then take that state with them on their travels, espousing the virtues of a place. Maybe a state is a collection of roads and highways. Some paved, some made only of dirt. Some seemingly always under construction. Trails to connect, to separate. A place where you learn to judge distance by time, not miles. Is a state defined by its politics? Are we determined solely by the men and women it elects to represent it in Washington DC? Are we the sum of our Congressmen? Are we the sum of our legislature, our governor, our courts? Perhaps a state is a collection of places. Not just of cities and towns, but of rivers, lakes, forests, farms, ranches, the wild and tamed land that is all jumbled together into one cohesive unit. Each individual spot making a place. Might a state be what we pass on to the next generation? The values taught at dining room tables, the beliefs taught in churches, the facts taught in our schools and universities. This collection making up the whole of place. Could a state be defined by what it is not? In absence of a trait, a place takes on a certain characteristic. The opposite of being. But, with a place with so many contradictions, could we even settle on what we are not? It seems like it should be so simple to define a state, to point at it, and say it is here. But, that does not account for the level of pride one has in a place, for the Four-oh-Six stickers that dot that back of pick-up trucks. Where does this pride come from? What instills the sense of place? Is it this pride that truly defines a state, because what is a place if no one will claim it. And call it home? What is a place without its defenders? Why am I even asking this question? Who am I to ask what defines the place where I live? Does anyone else lay awake at night pondering this, or am I the only one who is driven to know what defines a state? Does it matter how many people ask a question? Or is it still relevant, no matter how few people want to know the answer? Is this just a path to know myself? To know how I fit into this place? Into any place? And now which question vexes me more? What is a state or why do I care? Perhaps I should return to the original question, the first inquiry. And maybe through that answer, I will find the other that I seek. Perhaps a state really is just a geographic point. It's borders drawn long ago, unseen in reality, but clear on a map. Do states only truly exist on paper? On maps, on deeds, on territorial proclamations? And, if so, why are we proud of the state that we live in? Why are we proud of our spot on the map? Why are we proud of lines of latitude and longitude that were put down by someone long, long ago? A state, more than anything, is a set of contradictions and tensions, building up over time until these bizarre facts twist themselves into something beautiful. It is the tension of peoples, of ideas, of land. As citizens, we must learn to live with this tension. To outsiders, our state seems strange, maybe backwards. But, we only know one way to live. We have made peace with this places' contradictions. Should we simply insulate ourselves from the strange looks we get from others? Can they understand us? After all, some of them think we still fight Indians. Why should we explain ourselves to them? Maybe a state is beyond the understanding of those that do not live here. It is too vast. A state that can be visited, it can experienced, but to understand it takes more time than these travelers can afford. I have lived in this state for over seven years, and I am still taken back every now and again by its people, its culture, its politics. Do I dare say that I have lived here long enough to truly understand it? I feel like I must write about this place, humble myself before the page, in order to try and understand what this state means to me, what it means to those who came before me, what it will mean later on. I must write with and sit with the contradictions of this place in order to make sense of them. I must carve out my own understanding of this state, lest I lose myself to the sheer vastness of this place. And as I write, I add to the wealth of voices that have always talked about this place. From the old legends told by the first people, to tall tales told around campfires, to Stegner and Welch. And today, the most modern voices, posting their thoughts on this place, #lastbestplace, but always with the same goal of the storytellers of old, of the Western authors, and even myself. A state, more than anything, is a collection of stories handed down from generation to generation, whether told on long journeys as we traverse this place, or found in books and journals. Words winding a course through history as wild as any river here, with ink written on forest's worth of pages, all vying to define who and what we are as we leave our mark on this place. And so, we must write about the good, of the people, the communities, the coming together, the openness of the sky, our bounty of resources and beauty, our mountains, our prairie. About how we went to war with the native peoples, about how we have pillaged the land for personal gain, and how we have isolated ourselves from each other in our times of need. All of these stories weave together to form one. A state is the sum of its many narratives. A definition that seems simple on its face, but is so complex