THE BITTERROOT’S TIN CUP KID: JOURNALIST BESSIE K. MONROE CHRONICLES A CENTURY

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THE BITTERROOT'S TIN CUP KID:

JOURNALIST BESSIE K. MONROE CHRONICLES A CENTURY

by

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In 1987, after almost 70 years of reporting and editing, Bessie Kerlee Monroe died the oldest working journalist in the country. She lived and reported from Hamilton, Montana, in the developing Bitterroot Valley for the better part of the 20th century.

Born in 1888 on a pioneer homestead, B.K. spent the first third of her life living resourcefully and tenaciously. She learned to read from the newspapers plastered to her cabin walls. She lived for several years in the woods with her husband and gave birth to six children. Her last child arrived a few months after her husband’s untimely death. Left with six mouths to feed, a year of high school and no professional experience except a short stint as a reporter, B.K. summoned up her determined spirit and set out to become a journalist.

First hired as a correspondent for the Missoulian in 1920, B.K. filed Ravalli County reports on a daily mail bus, requiring her children help collect news and send copy. She also convinced Hamilton’s Ravalli Republican to run her material, and within two years added correspondence for Butte’s Montana Standard to her basket of wage-earning opportunities.

Eventually she also wrote for the Western News, the Ravalli Republican’s rival, and served as editor for both papers at different times. During the 1930s, B.K. also became the local Associated Press correspondent – a job she held until a stroke nearly took her life in 1968. Left with partial paralysis, she turned her energy into writing historical pieces, following up on her poetry and filing weekly columns.

B.K. served in several leadership capacities in her community and impacted fellow journalists with her depth, dedication and will. She was a woman ahead of her time. Untrained, however, B.K. developed her own journalism guidelines in the context of her time and made some news decisions that would be called into question today. Nonetheless, the indomitable B.K. left a legacy of longevity and resilience, paving the way for women in journalism and writing volumes of columns tracking 150 years of people in the Bitterroot. Here, for the first time, her story is presented and her writing collected.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the Ravalli County Museum and Bitter Root Valley Historical Society for the unfailing assistance during hours of endless study. A special thank you wish to Ada Zoske, who let me into her home and her memories, and to all the Kerlee family members who shared their enchanting stories.

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To my family, John, Jean and Ingunn Stromnes, and my husband, Abdallah Elias, I am grateful for your persistent encouragement.
No one ever saw Bessie Kerlee Monroe in pants. B.K. wore the clothes of her news reporting trade as she saw fit: black hat, black dress or navy suit, sheer hose and high-heeled black boots laced up tight. At the base of her collar she pinned a broach and draped a necklace.  

No one ever saw B.K. without her shirt buttoned all the way up to her neck. Loose-chained glasses resting high on an abrupt nose; hands clasping notebook and pencil; who would have recognized the woman nicknamed after her birthplace, the one Marcus Daly’s granddaughter would call the Tin Cup Kid?

Not Sacajawea, Shoshone guide for the Lewis and Clark Expedition descending the Lost Trail into the future Bitterroot Valley, Montana Territory. Not Father Jean Pierre DeSmet, missionary to the Salish and founder of Montana’s first white settlement in Stevensville. Nor the legendary Marcus Daly, copper king of a greedy chapter in Montana history, although he probably recalled the Darby logging camp in the 1890s when he shook the hand of foreman James Kerlee, B.K.’s father.

However, B.K., the country’s oldest working journalist when she died in 1987 and just shy of her 99th birthday, would easily recognize each of these influential figures in Montana’s brief history. She wrote volumes of columns about the themes of their lives and their impacts on the Bitterroot Valley.

While B.K. was not educated in journalism, she spent most of her life filling thousands of notebooks with information and quotes to produce daily copy for newspapers across the state, stories spawned by Ravalli County’s unpredictable and hasty development. She lived in the place “Where Montana Got Her Start,” a slogan that B.K. coined for a contest
This "vigorous woman journalist," this "indomitable newswoman of Montana," graciously accepted praise and criticism in different forms for nearly 70 years of prolific service in the profession. B.K. might feel most honored by a recent nomination into the Montana Newspaper Association Hall of Fame.

She wrote about the world through her personal lens, occasionally committing what today would be considered ethical lapses in the trade. But she kept the history of the early settlers of the Bitterroot Valley and in many ways told the stories of pioneers, journalists and women in their time; of lives in transition.

Marcus Daly's granddaughter, the Countess Margit Sigray Bessenyey, named B.K. the "Tin Cup Kid" because she recognized a woman proud of growing up in an era of romantic lore. The nickname struck an uncomplicated chord in the folk song of B.K.'s childhood, a composition of pioneers — such as her parents, James and Mary Sally Kerlee who lived off the land to feed their 11 children on a Darby homestead. Her nickname sealed the bond between B.K. and Margit. B.K.'s friendship with Margit was perhaps the closest female bond she enjoyed, though on the surface inexplicable. Margit — the wealthiest woman in the valley — and B.K., a skinny single mother of six, struggling to scrape by as a newspaper stringer.

I stumbled upon B.K.'s legacy late one March morning in 1999. I'd recently completed coursework for the master's program in journalism at the University of Montana and switched jobs from reporter at the Ravalli Republic to work for the competition across the street. On this day I walked two blocks to the county courthouse for the day's news, pausing at the intersection of Third Street and Bedford. I noticed an impressive red brick house rising from a wide, well-tended lawn. A sign on its door read,
“apartment for rent.” A small, sturdy man in the yard looked up. I introduced myself and asked about the rental. He told me the price, and said, “You know, B.K. Monroe lived here.” And he went on to relate the story of B.K.

Such an impressively long career and list of accomplishments piqued my interest, and so I asked natural-born Bitterooters if they had heard of B.K. Monroe. The response? “Are you kidding? Everybody knew B.K.”

I found B.K.’s daughter, Ada Zoske of Hamilton, who is 88 years old and an exemplary record of her mother’s life and personality. She told me the Kerlees would soon be having a family reunion in the valley. Lots of them knew B.K., she said. Upon her advice I also checked with Bob Gilluly, former Ravalli Republican editor who lives in Anaconda. He announced that he had recently nominated B.K. for the Montana Newspaper Association Hall of Fame.

With the exception of newspaper articles, nothing comprehensive had been written about this locally renowned woman journalist, or her fascinating involvement in half-a-dozen newspapers as a reporter and editor at a time when female journalists were typically confined to the lifestyle pages. Nothing substantial had been written that addresses B.K.’s impact on the Bitterroot Valley community, her documentation of early Ravalli County history, or her choices that led to being a professional worker first and a woman / mother second.

Currently I am managing editor of the Ravalli Republic, so when I approached B.K.’s work and life transitions, I naturally had an interest in the history of journalism in the Bitterroot Valley. I also wanted this project to sketch community development in Hamilton with the tool of B.K.’s newspaper work.
This project sprung from an interest in the long and challenging path of B.K. during a time when most women did not do the things she did. Not knowing B.K. was the most difficult obstacle to clear. Consequently, I patched together B.K.’s life story and motivations from hundreds of columns carrying sporadic details in 70 years worth of bound newspapers without indices. Conflicting and unverifiable details emerged. In these cases, I called upon family and friends to confirm the timeline of her life.

B.K.’s singleness of purpose and even circumstances afforded her personal control of her employment at a time when other women didn’t enjoy that kind of freedom, but the cost of frantic scrambling and punishing hours may have been tenderness for her children; warmth and intimacy in relationships. Relatives and friends were open about their admiration, love and respect for B.K., but when interviewed they were also careful – if not reluctant – to discuss her penchant for work. They highlighted their admiration for B.K. because she found ways to meet challenges and survive them.

B.K.’s remarkable longevity compels a better understanding of her background and motivation for writing. She started reporting for the money. Her husband’s death at a young age left B.K., 32, with five children and a sixth on the way. She had two years under her belt as a correspondent for the Butte Miner, a job she earned to help support the family when her husband took ill. That gave her the confidence to solicit jobs in the Bitterroot Valley in order to feed her family. Eventually her writing and work also met her internal needs for the rewards of community involvement and respect. In turn, the community helped care for her children, and then B.K. as she aged.

It is important to understand B.K.’s style of journalism in the context of her time. She was not educated in the trade. She avoided working in any one newsroom for very long.
She always kept a number of fires burning. Her efforts to broaden her base of employers only increased during times of personal crisis. Her style of writing, which became less objective as she grew older, kept mesmerizing readers with its candid if not preachy style of delivering information and telling stories. For many years, her work replicated how newspapers reported on their communities at the time. But by the time she was 80, B.K.’s style of journalism had evidently outworn its appreciation. Because of the role she had carved out for herself in her community, though, B.K. found ways to publish her writing until she died.

By the time she was 96, B.K. wrote a column that reflected acceptance of her personal choices and a thankfulness for her opportunities in life. She wrote:

Father Time is a ruthless sort of parent in some of his timing deals, but as a boss of the year, let alone the days and weeks, time bids one to serve as best we can, even in these “last-of-the-century” years.

And the account of life times and their endings are kind of a tattle tale of life’s record keepers. They are an “amen” that truly means “so be it” for us has beens.

Yet I’d rather be a has-been than a never-was-er.

Looking back over the years of work that included family and a lot of good times too, gives lessons and I am still learning and trying to right mistakes.

Life is still pretty good.5

The day after she died, Aug. 20, 1987, B.K.’s final column ran in the Ravalli Republic. More than 100 people attended her funeral, including her living children and newsroom colleagues. Many of the publishers, editors and reporters she had known had long since left the world, but several carry a torch of inspiration handed by B.K. even today.

Dillon Tribune publisher John Barrows, former publisher of the Ravalli Republic, said B.K. drew a large following of readers and influenced numerous journalists who either followed her lead or spent time with her at the nursing home where she served her final
years. There, they would hear a dramatic story of the news business in the early days of B.K.’s beloved Bitterroot Valley. In a 1978 column about the life of B.K., Barrows wrote:

Publishers come and go, but B.K. stays to provide the new people with direction toward covering the Bitter Root. And when B.K. says that’s the way it was, you can bet your boots on it. She was there.

B.K. documented the changing face of the Bitterroot Valley from 1920 to 1987. As she aged, she better defined the tensions between races, genders, politics, culture, environment and community. As a writer during these times, B.K. demonstrated the changing views of white culture. Her yearning for justice for the exiled Salish American Indians contradicted her romantic vision of the pioneers, who paved the way for the Salish’s removal. But she was not immune to experiencing the changes and paradoxes. She carried her own—her admiration of men and tendency to trivialize women or stereotype their roles was evident in her writing. While she felt the voice of women should be a force of impact on politics, she also believed women wasted energy on trivial matters and should learn to think more like men.

B.K.’s fascination with Marcus Daly and his “Big Mill” in Hamilton, which left the west face of the Bitterroot Valley clear-cut, collided with instincts evident in many of her columns that humans should use resources wisely and conserve the environment.

Her blunt manner with people—mainly editors—who didn’t show her respect, or later in life for those who didn’t act as she pleased, became her mode. Alternatively, B.K. wrote abundant poetry—gentle and forgiving verse honoring family, friends, working people and the beautiful Bitterroot Valley.
B.K. moved with the people who could give her the information she needed, and surrounded herself with those who could give her resources for survival. Raising six children required a certain amount of humility, yet B.K. would have refused state welfare had it been offered. She did accept help from neighbors and friends. She also relied on children and grandchildren to help her gather news and meet deadlines.

B.K. Monroe’s legacy is one of longevity. Her reporting broke ground. The passage of B.K.’s life tells the tale of early settlers in the Bitterroot Valley and illuminates journalism as it developed in Montana’s 20th century. Women reporters did not typically cover the list of beats that B.K. handled, nor did they juggle multiple newspaper jobs. B.K. corresponded both breaking news and features for several publications at once during the bulk of her career. Her experiences help construct an understanding of early women journalists and how the Bitterroot Valley and its white settlers developed into a community.

1 Bessie Myrtle Kerlee Monroe went by B.K. in the news business, shortened from her initials B.K.M. posted at the end of news reports filed in Ravalli and Missoula county newspapers, as well as her Associated Press reports. B.K. is used for these purposes. Footnotes reflect each publication’s exact use.
3 Interview with Evelyn King, March 2001.
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Chapter One: Beating Time

Just before 7 a.m., Aug. 21, 1968, Bessie Kerlee Monroe left her bedroom to collect her morning paper from the hall of her apartment in downtown Hamilton, Montana. She reached for the news and stumbled to the floor. Knees buckled as her body gave way to a paralyzing stroke.

The 79-year-old journalist found herself staring at the doormat, which “had no welcome inscription, but it flatly told me I’d have to stay until someone else came,” she later wrote for the Missoulian newspaper, where her byline had appeared for 47 years. “This force that had barged into my life without asking and without taking into consideration that my 80th birthday was only a month away ..... I still had commitments in the newsworld and I needed time and energy and mental activity to meet these work plans.”

B.K. yelled into the hallway for help. Only her echo answered. Wanting a hammer, something to pound, she managed to remove her slipper to strike the wood floor. “That was the trick for rescue,” she recalled.

A neighbor telephoned B.K.’s daughter, Ada Zoske of Hamilton, who called B.K.’s son, George Monroe. He drove to the apartment, helped her to the car and rushed her the nine blocks to Marcus Daly Memorial Hospital.

Medical professionals, uncertain of the damage, responded cautiously to B.K.’s questions and concerns. However, she later explained: “that brand of ‘Tender Loving
Care’ that is dominant in our little endowed hospital here in Montana’s Bitter Root Valley somehow tided me over that first mixed-up day and night.”

The next day, B.K. awoke partially paralyzed. Her once clever and probing tongue held “a thick kind of action, a strange way of handling the questions I tried to ask.”

She who had walked hundreds of miles between a one-room Darby schoolhouse and her homestead as a child, and for the better part of the 1900s strode thousands of miles of Ravalli County streets that she had never learned to drive, now found that her left leg weighed her down like a log.

For the first time in 50 years of writing volumes of copy, a book of poetry, boxes of notes and letters, and personal volumes of Ravalli County history, B.K. wrote her “heart quietly broke.”

During those first vulnerable moments of paralysis, B.K. recalled a comment made by the two men still alive in her immediate family: son, George Monroe, and son-in-law, Fred Zoske. They said: “Mother, you’ve always had guts and you still have. Keep it up like this and you’ll lick this. We’re with you all the way.”

Though they did not likely speak simultaneously, they delivered similar messages of hope and faith in B.K. She wrote elaborate, lively and at times promotional stories from her first news reports for the Missoulian in 1920 until her final column for the Ravalli Republican in Hamilton in 1987.3

“It might as well be right,” was the maxim of late Ravalli Republican linotype operator J.B. (Bert) Ellis. In 1922, B.K. considered Ellis and printer A.C. (Archie) Mitchell mentors when she moved from correspondence into the general Ravalli Republican office.4

2
B.K.’s motto could have been: “It might as well be B.K.” Her original interpretation of events and dialogue were her stock in trade. She didn’t worry much about some unassailable objective “Truth.” If it was written by B.K. it was good enough for B.K. and the people of the time she represented, the first white settlers in the Bitterroot Valley. The homesteaders who struggled and built the foundation of Darby, for example, were her parents and friends and supporters. The “oldtimers,” as she would refer to her company of peers, were the political, social, artistic and spiritual builders of early Ravalli County and its string of school districts and towns.

B.K. possessed a style that drew followers. Community members took part in caring for her children because they respected the results of her professional employment seven days a week.

The second day in the hospital, B.K., besides crediting the men in her life with support, also honored her timeworn relationship with God for helping speed recovery from the stroke. She later described the essence of her faith and how she held it:

I believe God is at hand to counsel troubled souls and I am sure He was there when that dread word, paralysis, had settled in my confused thinking, for some inner voice told me to do my part and kept it with good grace. I began to try. It is one thing to try and fail. It is quite another thing to fail to try. One (who) tries and fails still has a second chance, but failure to try means no chance at all in my book and I thought about that remark of my son’s. Well, I reasoned, if I did have ‘guts’ it was better to use them in the try-to-get-well business than to forget them and stay sick.

It took six weeks of training and dozens of water-therapy sessions before B.K. walked again. Her young physical therapist, Barney Lambert of Hamilton assisted, “making my feet go regulation ‘every-other-step.’” Soon she walked through fall leaves with Lambert. “I found the game exciting enough when the walk took me all the way around the hospital block.”
B.K.’s determination made it possible to move back into her own apartment and avoid a nursing home for a couple of years, according to her doctor, Walker John Ashcraft.

“She was pretty courageous the way she handled it,” Ashcraft said. “She didn’t let the stroke interfere.”

Four months later, B.K. was back in her role as a member of the Fourth Estate. She kept step by interviewing on the telephone and taking visitors. Now writing primarily for the Ravalli Republican, her letters to the editor and guest commentaries still appeared occasionally in the Missoulian. “The stroke certainly didn’t impair her mentally,” Ashcraft said.

She had realistic expectations, though, and B.K. wrote of her new life: “Not with any grace, it is true, nor with any spirit of cockiness, just on the move …”

According to John Barrows, then-advertising manager of the Ravalli Republic, B.K. was still the “indomitable newswoman of Montana,” despite the stroke.

B.K. received widespread attention because of her comeback as an elderly reporter with a paralyzed left hand. Reader’s Digest, a national syndicated publication called Grit, the Missoulian, the Spokesman Review and the Montana Standard each profiled her after the stroke. When she visited her daughter, Ruth Cron, a paper in Ohio, The Daily News, also featured B.K. Later, the Bitterroot Senior Citizen Voice, a publication of the Stevensville Star, included a substantial piece about her life and work, and a former editor of B.K.’s wrote a touching feature piece for the Missoulian.

After B.K.’s stroke, the Ravalli Republic published a house advertisement in her honor for each birthday. In 1977, for example, a collage with a photo of B.K. at work filled most of a news page. Clip-art roses and chunky headlines from stories past danced across
the advertisement and included the headline: “A birthday rose for the grand lady of the Ravalli Republic on her 89th birthday today.”

B.K.’s passion for her career would be described in 1975 as “whatever you call a habit that keeps you wanting to startle the whole state of Montana with a news story of some kind.” Her love of Montana and the Bitterroot went hand-in-hand with her dedication to the field of journalism, a tenacious spirit that started back in her humble and demanding pioneer beginning, a lifestyle characterizing B.K.’s existence until she was 26 years old.

2 Unless otherwise noted, facts and quotes in this chapter were taken from a story by Bessie K. Monroe, “She’s Back In the Race,” Missoulian, December 8, 1968, p. 41.
3 In 1973, the Bitterroot Valley’s five-day daily Ravalli Republican experienced a name change after publisher George Danker, watching evening television, learned some sordid details about the Watergate scandal involving President Richard Nixon. Frustrated, he promptly slashed the “-an” off the flag, though nary an explanation appeared in new issues of the Ravalli Republican. “It’s not a myth,” said then-advertising manager John Barrows, “because I had to do all the paperwork.” (Telephone interviews with John Barrows, May of 1999, and March 23, 2001.)
5 For these purposes, “Bitterroot” will be written as a single word, as generally agreed upon for reference for the valley, its mountain range and river. No doubt B.K. would have fought this choice, as she battled the Forest Service’s decision to switch from the two-word “Bitter Root.” For years, B.K.’s historical reports and weekly column, “B.K. Files,” warned of the damaging break from tradition, accusing the Forest Service of having a predilection for combining words. (B.K. Monroe, “Proper Wordage for River, Valley, Flower,” Ravalli Republican, May 2, 1968, p. 1.)
8 Ibid.
Chapter Two – Pioneer Homesteading

The Town of Darby, Darby School District and B.K. Monroe were all born in 1888. B.K. liked to pronounce that all were “admitted as citizens” into the Montana Territory the same year.²

Several neighborhoods attached to Darby in a five-mile radius. Families met on Sundays, enjoying an open-door policy from one neighborhood to the next. Guests found places at dinner tables when they arrived. People shared animals, tools, tasks and childcare as necessary.³

“Neighbors turned out when help was needed, and the slogan of the times, “The Bitter Root Turn,” meant – “You help me and I’ll help you” – and so people got along,” B.K. wrote.⁴

Montana’s vast wilderness joined Washington Territory, then Idaho Territory and finally in 1864, Montana Territory sprang from the lawbooks.

Early pioneer life ingrained a determination and tenacity in B.K. long before fate dealt her the card of single mother navigating a man’s profession.

Homestead born

James and Mary Sally Kerlee were raised in Missouri during the Civil War.

The parents of James Kerlee, born in 1855, moved their family out of town to the rural parts of Franklin County to escape guerilla warfare to which Missouri was prey.⁵ When he was about 20, after working on the railroad and for a cattle ranch in Texas, James returned to court his childhood friend, Mary Sally Hibler. Mary Sally’s father had been a
Missouri farmer who fought for the north in the Civil War, then survived three months as a Confederate prisoner before returning to his family.

James courted Mary Sally, often walking her to singing school. They married May 27, 1877, and worked a Missouri farm while they had six children. In search of a better life, they drove a covered wagon to Arkansas. There they lost two toddlers to cholera – George Emmet, 4, and Robert Elmer, 3, both of whom B.K. never knew.

After three or four years farming in Arkansas, a visitor drifting back from the Bitterroot Valley in Montana told a tale of its beauty and potential. Again the Kerlees packed, this time taking an immigrant train and landing in Grantsdale a week later in April of 1888. The Clicks, family friends, accepted the Kerlees at their Grantsdale-area home until James found a good chunk of land to homestead.

He claimed a 160-acre plot a couple of miles southwest of Darby – located about 20 miles south of Grantsdale and deep in the barely touched Tin Cup Canyon. About a dozen families lived in the Tin Cup area, including several former Kerlee neighbors from both Missouri and Arkansas. While many who moved to western Montana in the 19th century were miners from California and Oregon, a large proportion of the immigrants were Civil War veterans, many of them poor and embittered. Southern sympathizers were predominant, according to historian K. Ross Toole, and the pattern continued. The Kerlees would house many settlers who came to make a new start from the South.

Rugged and mysterious, the area also held potential for ambitious ranchers, farmers, miners, trappers and loggers. B.K. wrote:

A country of homesteads and timber claims and virgin pine forests where logging concerns were creating industry with crude and dogged methods. Such was the picture of Tin Cup canyon with its little mountain meadows and clear, swift creek, spread before the Missouri-born immigrants in April, 1888. The place to build a
home, the place to settle a homestead, there to delve in new soil and sow wheat and garden seed. ....

Yes, the Tincup canyon was a western Montana niche in the stately hills, forested and with a charm all its own. By and by a wagon road was etched by the heavy loggin' trucks that were pulled by four-horse teams. The road linked the Kerlee farm to the main wagon route that ran north-south through the Bitter Root Valley.

B.K. found Darby’s lengthy christening amusing. Apparently an adventuring character, Jimmy Doolittle, wanted the town named after him. Though not officially recorded, it caught on. Until the end of the 19th century, older townsfolk called the community Doolittle. However in 1888 postmaster James Darby recorded “Darby” on the state lawbooks. For unknown reasons he had originally wanted to call the village Harrison, but finally presented his own last name when he found that Montana already had a Harrison.

Awaiting her birth, B.K.’s parents hoped the weather would hold. Windows hadn’t arrived from a Missoula dealer, and fall settled in. Mary hung blankets in the windows to keep the cold at bay, and the homemade latch-string door helped keep out the forest air. Mary Sally delivered her sixth living child on Sept. 22, 1888. In pioneer communities, several women jointly tended neighboring births. Jim Darby’s wife and other area women served as midwives for B.K.’s arrival in the world. By that time a few outbuildings had also been constructed. B.K. wrote of the scene:

By September the homesteaders had constructed a barn and a granary, a henhouse and other sheds, and a ditch of clear water heading in Tincup Creek brought its clean good flow down past the lean-to kitchen door for house use. There was a natural spring of icy water down a little slope and soon there was a trail from the house to the spring and primitive, joyous living had begun for the James Kerlee family of eight.

Mary Sally made a few extra dollars a week cleaning shirts and socks for the men at the logging camp situated across the creek from the homestead. Kerlee sons trudged
across the creek to return the clothes to the loggers. With the help of Mary, Solly purchased children's books from a neighboring saloon.

James was a cattle rancher but he also grew grain and dug ditches and by the turn of the century participated in the open-range controversy between cattle and sheep ranchers. In 1903, James Kerlee would be described in a history book as Montezuma's proudest rancher—one of the best known and most respected in his small mountain community.11

With the loss of Mary's only daughter, life dealt a blow to a husband of the welding trade and operator of a busy mining claim and stayed in a small town. Montana's culture is a place where hard work and high principles are a way of life, permeating every aspect of the state and its inhabitants.

Kerlee's wife passed away from cancer, and it was against this backdrop that Kerlee worked to raise his children. He sold what cattle he had to the附近镇的 rancher and moved to Grizzly, Montana, where he built a new life.

At night for the Kerlee children—oldest to youngest: Elizabeth, William, John, Leila, May, George, Benjamin, Robert, Lewis, Deeda, Rose, Flossie, Vivian—and family—

The Tin Cup family homestead
across the creek to return the clothes to the loggers. With the cash, Mary Sally purchased children’s books from a neighboring salesman.  

James was a cattle rancher but he also grew grain and dug ditches, and by the turn of the century participated in the open-range controversy between cattle and sheep ranchers. In 1913, James Kerlee would be described in a history book on Montana as a prominent ranchman – one of the best known and most respected in his small Montana community.  

With the harvest in, James took an annual trip to pan for gold. He caught a ride to a trailhead of the Nez Perce pass into Idaho where he worked his placer mining claim and stayed in a small cabin. He’d spend a few weeks each year panning for gold with hand-built sluice boxes. He yielded enough gold, B.K. wrote, to “keep that fire of prospecting burning.”  

During winter, he worked as a sawyer. He also trapped mink, marten and lynx and sold their pelts to fur companies for supplemental income. “For the cash of course, but it was a good life,” B.K. recalled.  

Kerlee’s winter timber work consisted of skidding logs off hillsides and trucking them to the river’s edge to await spring. Men herded the logs down the Bitterroot River to Daly’s Hamilton mill during spring high-water’s annual wild log-ride. Grizzly bears were common, according to B.K. Her father, James Kerlee killed one after it took his livestock and nailed its hide to the barn wall.  

At night for the Kerlee children – oldest to youngest: Edward, William, Cora, Lilly May, George, Benjamin, Robert, Lewis, Bessie, Rosa, Flossie, Virgil and Emily – grizzlies weren’t the fear or fascination of the group of siblings. Rather, B.K. and a few
of her kin would sneak outside to imitate the howls of coyotes, hoping for a response.

“Girls as well as boys were impudent mimics,” she recalled. “No proof that our ‘act’ was taken seriously by the coyote messengers of the wild. They kept their own counsel.”

As November appeared on the store calendar, James Kerlee required his sons to help collect winter wood. They threw log chains, saws and axes in the back of the wagon. A horse-team carried the men to an already cut hill or even a spot on their own land. “The whine of the cross-cut and the staccato of the double-bitted axe were on the air through the whole day,” B.K. described. “Swampers of the logging camp left treetops galore that this home crew sawed and chopped into stovewood lengths to pile on the wagon and unload at the home woodpile.”

The Kerlee family ate meals at the original homestead in an outdoor lumber lean-to. It also held an extra bed on the south end for two brothers, Ben and Bert. Bert was named Lewis Berten for the ancestral grandmother – Nancy Hibler, born Nancy Lewis, whom B.K. said was a cousin of the explorer Meriwether Lewis.

In summer they converted empty granaries into “dormitories,” as B.K. called them – one for the boys and one for the girls.

“Our two older sisters were good ‘deputy’ mothers and I can recall their cuddling as something wonderful, for Mother with four younger than I had to divide her time as best she could,” B.K. recalled.

Gardens took constant care. Mary Sally methodically carved rows into the earth. In fall the children helped thresh grain and dig potatoes, which they put in the hillside root cellar with a pit for cabbage and turnips and rutabagas and carrots. A cool smokehouse held pork and sausage in a stone jar.
After wintering in the earth, winter onions and parsnips were pulled in March of each year. "Oh my, how good they were stewed and then browned in pork fat," B.K. wrote.  

Green onions popped up new each spring from fall planting and promised "a treat of tangy nourishment, especially with browned bacon." Bacon fat served as salad dressing of the time, though they hadn't heard the word "salad" before. Salad or not, lettuce tasted far better with the versatile and rich grease topping. "When our mother cut the first 'mess of lettuce' leaving the roots to grow more, the lettuce-and-onion mixture doused with vinegar and bacon fat was really a springtime table favorite," B.K. wrote.  

Roasted chicken and squash with fresh bread was a main meal favorite.  

When Easter came around each spring, the homesteaders celebrated life. Picking and giving wildflowers for warm wishes, children made up their own names for the crocus, buttercup and yellow bell. B.K. recalled:  

We did know wild flowers for their own appeal to childish hearts and to our mother when she would take the bouquet we had picked on a slope near home and slip them into a glass or sometimes a tumbler.  

Into the water went the handful of wild pretty Easter flowers, a pat of her slim fingers and then set in the window or on the table, even our father and brothers took notice when they came in for dinner at noontime. Easter flowers they truly were, for Eastertime found them giving out promise.  

Easter also involved annual egg pranks by the boys who developed a tradition of stealing hen eggs for a week before the holiday. Mother Kerlee feigned concern, wondering aloud if she should feed the chickens more grain. Come Easter morning, the boys hid the eggs for finding. "Hats were egg baskets on that wonderful morning," B.K. wrote. "There was no punishment for the egg-stealing, ever. The frying pan sizzled faithfully until more than one platter of eggs, sunnyside-up, found a place on the big breakfast table."
The best coffee—a popular beverage among homesteaders—was frequently referred to by B.K. as the Arbuckle Brothers’ brand, which was sealed in a package for purchase at the local market at a cost of 20 to 35 cents a pound. The family saved Arbuckle labels to earn mail-order, colored biblical prints for the walls of the cabin.

Mary also decorated walls with old newspapers, from which the children learned to read. “But it was wonderful! It gave us all an insight,” B.K. recalled.

When short on money, Mary substituted grain for coffee. She scorched fresh wheat in her oven and turned the kernels frequently until the batch appeared as tiny coffee beans. “But there the comparison ended. Besides the fact that it didn’t have caffeine, it still wasn’t coffee and didn’t fool anybody,” B.K. recalled.

Aside from coffee, the main staples purchased by the Kerlee family were hominy, navy beans and red spotted beans.

Soaking corn in lye made from ash removed the bran to fashion hominy, which Mary boiled, fried in bacon fat and salted before serving. Beans, in constant demand, provided a meal mainstay and appeared on the table at least three times a week. For the best beans, B.K. shared a basic home recipe for readers in 1978:

Our mom would pour the beans into her apron-covered lap and sort them by the handful to pick out imperfect beans and tiny clods; this done, the beans were washed and dumped into the pot, to be boiled 20 minutes in soda water, then carefully rinsed and again put in the pot, this time with a hunk of side pork for about three hours of steady boil. Boiled beans were our favored dish rather than baked.

Each autumn, the family ritually made cabbage into sauerkraut: slicing, pounding, shredding, salting and curing the vegetable until its smell permeated the kitchen and, when it was finally ready, odorized the entire house. A hillside root cellar stored potatoes, cabbage, rutabagas, carrots, turnips and red onions. Shelves of canned jams,
sauces, fruit butters, and green tomatoes flavored with lemon surrounded apples stored in a building above the root cellar.

At apple-picking time, B.K.'s favorite dishes were multitudinous approaches to the varieties of apple fruit in her family's orchard: apple pie, apple butter, dried apples, fried apples. Many homesteads had oak barrels to store apple cider in good years. But bread pudding with homemade egg custard and cow cream promised to be delectable even in the absence of apples.

In a column turned poem, B.K. wrote of her childhood adoration of apples, comparing the joy to that of a successful gold miner.

Windfalls in the night, became an incidental pleasure
For homestead children. One of the happiest mornings
Could bring reward when eyes still sleepy, spied
A yellow-white glimmer in the orchard grass
A true windfall like that, would bring as much joy
To the child finder, as the red winter apple of Christmas
In a stocking toe, nay even more, for winter mornings
Kept little feet indoors,
The summer applefest grass-clutched,
was all the young'n who climbed out of bed first,
Tiptoed, off and running to get the first fruit
A southwest wind had harvested.
In deep grass.
Nuggets in a gold pan, precious find of placer sands
Were for old men. For children
Transparent apples hidden in grass were ransomed treasure,
Breakfast-time treats. Gnawed to the very core, every apple
Laid bare its brown, heart-shaped seeds.

Mary Sally Kerlee had to be enterprising to feed her family and because jars weren't easily had for canning, she came up with her own method using beer bottles and a harness ring. B.K. recalled her mother's secret recipe:

Since we lived within a mile of a big logging camp we children scurried around the edges of the camp road to pick up the long-necked beer bottles.
If we were lucky there would be half a dozen and Mother’s genius changed each bottle into a fruit jar. She would heat an iron harness ring red rot (sic) and skilfully drop it over the neck to rest on the shoulder of the bottle. Snap and the neck would topple from the bottle.

The ex-beer bottle would be cleansed thoroughly and Mother would pour her new chokecherry jam into it very carefully so as not to chip glass from the raw edge of her jar.

What next: A fold of clean white muslin salvaged from a flour sack would go over the open jar and here, again, we youngsters came in for our part of the work. We would gather pine gum or pitch and Mother would heat this to melting, then pour it over the patch of white muslin so that it ran down over the sides, completely sealing the jam within the jar. And it kept, but not long after the jar was opened.

As I said earlier, chokecherry jam or syrup beats almost anything else for pancakes or hot biscuits. Long live the chokecherry! 33

Mary clothed her children in hand-sewn or second-hand apparel. Boys wore shirts and pants; girls pulled on dresses, petticoats and aprons. The sewing machine was “almost as important as the cookstove,” B.K. wrote.

Mary Sally’s apron hung as a symbol of nurturance and comfort for B.K. throughout her life and as one of the only ways in which B.K. verbalized the tenderness of a loving mother.

Aprons make a dozen appearances in her writing – never one of her own, however – and they serve to symbolize home, hospitality, optimism or gratitude. 34 She wrote: “Did your mother ever come into your home, holding a gingham apron by its hem, to show the very first little chickens? No live moving pictures can ever take the place that all these actual contacts with farm creatures and their young, imprinted on my memories.” 35

In 1973, B.K. credited the wives of pioneers for their home-making skills while wearing their aprons. She recalled:

The wives of these Bitter Root valley ranchers tied gingham aprons over their calico dresses each week day, but when holidays and Sundays dawned, their best dresses were protected skirt-wise by pretty white aprons gathered to a waist-line belt that was finished off with yard-long apron strings, tied in a bow in the back.
The white apron was in itself a badge of honor as its wearer moved from stove to table serving Sunday dinner guests and her family with good homecooked provender. For me the white apron is a symbol.

B.K. saw in her mother’s apron black, white and brown chicks mixed in a pile of thriving life as the adopted children of an unknowing Plymouth Rock hen. Mary Kerlee had coaxed the hen into an apple box bed of straw where she had placed 13 eggs. And the hen found each new chick dear. B.K. wrote:

No incubators then, just Old Mother Nature bossing the job of reproduction; another cycle of farm life. It had an incomparable newness every springtime. ... The baby chickens carried to the house to show her children were part of a little farm ceremony each year to the Kerlee “young’ns.” So were the calves and colts and little pigs. And the first “mess of lettuce with attendant green winter onions.”

Out of necessity, homesteaders invented arts and crafts activities. B.K. and her sisters made postcards out of wild birch bark pieces that their brothers brought home. “We wrote our own messages or quoted some woodsy lore and these cards then got two-cent stamps in corners and, wild as they had been, went hither and yon on postal travel,” she wrote. “Truly they made a hit.”

At Thanksgiving, turkey was rare, but neighbors gathered together to share a traditional American meal. The year before her stroke, B.K. honored her neighbors’ kindliness in a speech. “They are gone over the ranges now, most of them, but their words to their children and their children’s children would be, ‘Help one another and be thankful that the Lord gave you neighbors,’” she wrote.

When B.K. was 5 years old, she received her first Christmas doll. It was a china-painted, dark-haired, red-cheeked girl. The following Christmas, older sister Ella saved enough wages to put a doll with “real golden hair” in B.K.’s stocking, a find that B.K. cherished for both its value and source.
The whole community pitched in one Christmas to help a homestead widow with three children. Jim hitched up his wagon, filled the back with straw, a sack of potatoes and a shoulder of pork, and stopped by his neighbors until the wagon was full — the community’s gift to this plucky single mom.40

In spring of 1894, before the family moved into the town of Darby and even before the conventional age of 6, B.K. convinced her parents to let her attend the one-room schoolhouse in town. The older children took responsibility for the younger, and B.K. recalled “it was good to be one of a big family, each looking out for the other, good to have hard-working parents who wanted us.” 41

Each day, B.K. walked two and a half miles down the rough canyon road to school, struggling with exhaustion and tears. She survived the battle, she wrote, because “the vision of a smiling young teacher at their desk somehow kept me pickin’ ‘em up and putting ‘em down’ as to my five-year-old feet. Sometimes my brothers would give a lift piggy back.” 42

Darby School District No. 9 was a weathered log one-room building donated by the Overturf family in 1885. Teachers came from the Midwest, primarily Iowa and Missouri, and were paid $35 a month with room and board.43 Two three-month terms of school were offered each academic year, spring and fall. “We as homestead children had splendid, thinking women teachers and early homelife afforded work and play,” B.K. wrote.44 She had fond memories of learning at school with its homestead-style limitations.

I remember my first teacher, Mrs. M.E. O’Brien, later Mrs. William Cameron, and her capable way of administering the Three Rs. The blackboard and its chalk, the red-felt framed slates and the slate pencils. There was little paper in those early school-
times, though I can remember teachers coming up with bright colored paper cut in small strips to make pretty paper chains to hang in the windows.

And with no organ or piano, we were taught to sing sweet old songs. For “Last Day of School” programs the pupils learned recitations, such things as, “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere,” and “The Last Hymn,” and now and then a comical bit of verse.

In summer teacher would find Bitter Root bouquet on her desk, or wild roses.

And we always observed Arbor Day by planting a tree or two. These seldom lived more than a few months, since there was no water on the flat.

In fact drinking water was carried from a neighboring well, two boys sharing the work, the big pail hung on a pole that distributed the labor. There would be the tin dipper for us to drink from. No, nobody died, but then we didn’t know about a big word like “sanitation,” so trouble was never borrowed.45

Two half-hour recesses a day for students to play games such as “Steal Sticks” were divided by a lunch break at noon.46 B.K. delighted in her mom-packed meals. She wrote:

Biscuit or light bread sliced with home-churned butter and jelly, meat too, like fried bacon or sausage, centered on extra bread. Apples from the orchard were so good to chomp (and offer teachers!). No thermos bottles of milk. We had the proverbial dipper and pail water service.47

Lessons included reciting selections from Whittier and Longfellow and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. “You should have heard the emotional mispronouncing that sometimes came for the descriptive lines of Longfellow’s poems,” B.K. wrote.48

After school, children headed through town back to the homestead. Loggers walking the same direction also gave younger kids shoulder rides.49

Mill traffic guaranteed that Darby and other Bitterroot towns were chock full of saloons. At any given time in Darby, six saloons along Main Street offered loggers respite from hard work. The false-front architecture appeared “gingerbread” to B.K.

After school, B.K. and her siblings trudged a half-mile through town, typically unable to navigate a path on sidewalks crowded with saloon-goers. “So we would keep to the dusty street and believe me they were dusty,” she recalled.50
Without city sprinklers to boast like Hamilton, Darby streets were dusty. But the Darby school yard was lovely and full of bitterroots, “pink with them in June,” B.K. wrote. Children picked the bitterroot flowers in late spring to decorate teacher’s desk.

One early June when she was 7 years old, B.K.’s first encounter with American Indians frightened her terribly. She and her siblings were beginning the trek home from school. A group of “bucks and squaws,” also described by B.K. as “red men,” quietly passed through Darby, probably on their annual bitterroot digging expedition. But it was enough to scare the young girl who had heard only stories but never come in contact with native people.

“There were Indians in the town,” B.K. wrote. “Bucks with long, black braids and squaws with papooses strapped to their backs. I remember one squaw was riding in a travois behind a buck on his saddled horse. All of it frightened me.” She left her brothers and charged up the canyon. Early summer brought high water, and the absence of a customary bridge across Tin Cup Creek. Hastily B.K. crossed the foot log in its place. Crossing too fast she looked down and slipped. “Then the swift current was carrying me along like a stick some one might have tossed to its waves,” she recalled. A neighbor witnessed the fall, rescued B.K. and took her home to his wife who dressed her in dry clothes and gave her a warm supper. At home, her family met her with tears and scolding. B.K. explained 83 years later: “I had heard so many bad stories about Indians that I was frightened to death – I don’t know why. Of course, we all know the truth, now.”

Later that summer, B.K. saved her younger sister Rose from drowning in the spring. Dipping the pail, Rose dropped into the spring. B.K. pulled her out and lost her own
bucket, which disappeared forever into the water. "We were thankful all around, for the nearly drowned child was soon warm and dry and put to bed for awhile to ward off chills, but she took it as a kind of lark, which was the best way," B.K. recalled. 

In 1895, when the First Baptist Church opened, the Town of Darby, the Darby School District, and B.K. Monroe were all 7 years old. The missionary spirit was alive and well, so it was no surprise that a ledger contained an extensive list of donations – albeit small amounts – for the young church. James and Mary Sally Kerlee signed the ledger, not offering a lot but "a dollar then bought more than the dime-a-dozen dollars of today," B.K. recalled. The occasional lumberjack who spent Saturday night on the town but appeared in church would bless the church funds by dropping a rare silver dollar in the hat. Twelve silver dollars were received between 1878 and 1900.

Benjamin Franklin Cooper – white-haired Uncle Frank to the 12 Kerlee children – served as Baptist minister. Each Sunday his team of horses pulled him four miles to Sunday school at 2 p.m. He only offered full church service the second Sunday of the month. During Sunday school, children gathered around the organ for singing. Monthly services offered sermon and prayer. Uncle Frank was "unfailing in his benediction that asked his Lord to ‘save us all without the loss of one,’" B.K. recalled. He offered the same prayer at Kerlee family dinners.

"Church" took place in Miles Hall, the downtown building above George Miles' store, which doubled as a lively town dance hall on Saturday nights. "The organ was giving out dance music the night before," B.K. recalled, "but it was reasonably as good at the melody of hymns on Sunday."
The building’s owner, Miles, led square dancing and socializing. B.K. wrote: “But George Miles netted the joy, too. He called the dances ‘quadrilles’ and sets of four couples each were needed. What if there were to be Sunday School and church the morning after …?” 61

**Early town life**

In 1888 Montana Territory was strongly Democratic. The “party was the only really virile political force in the Territory,” according to renowned historian K. Ross Toole. 62 At the same time, under the hand of Marcus Daly, Anaconda was producing copper on a massive scale at significant profit.63

B.K.’s father was a devout Republican, though he earned extra money working as a foreman for Daly at a Darby logging camp. B.K.’s first newsroom job and her longest tenure would be for a paper that supported Marcus Daly and the Anaconda Company policies.

James Kerlee recalled the ease at which Daly mixed with the loggers. 64 By the time B.K. was born, Daly was very busy about 20 miles north of the Kerlee home, establishing relationships with important valley people, his stock farm and family home at the base of the Sapphire Mountains with a scenic view of the Bitterroots. A post office, store and hotel popped up in his town known as Riverside. By 1890, Riverside village, supporting Daly’s mill on the Bitterroot River and a rapidly growing number of workers and their families, became Hamilton. In 1898, Hamilton grabbed the Ravalli County seat from Stevensville, the first white settlement in Montana.65

During the same period, James and Mary Kerlee were required to “prove-up” on their 160-acre homestead by filing for its legitimacy with the U.S. government. By occupying
and improving the land, homesteaders could acquire a free title without payment per acre, though payment typically ran at only about $1.25 per acre. By 1896, eight years after arriving, James Kerlee proved up in a public notice in the newspaper and acquired the title to his land. He didn’t waste time trading the property with Nathaniel Wilkerson—who would be one of the first forest rangers on the Bitterroot Valley.  

B.K.’s father came out of the deal with a smaller chunk of land in town and $400 cash paid by a logging company for the timber value. So the Kerlees moved to the clapboard Wilkerson house smack in the middle of what is today Darby.

The house sat on 40 acres on the country road a half-mile north of Darby. The Kerlees bought an additional 80 acres east of the Bitter Root River. On this plot James planted wheat and oats and dug a river ditch to irrigate his land and water his cattle. A small frame house and outbuildings remained on the site decades later after the Kerlees donated part of the land for the Darby school, but would eventually disappear when a timber company purchased the site for an expanding mill. The Kerlees renovated the three-room house and added a bunkhouse.

By the time the Kerlees moved to town, they took their company of 11 children from 2 to 18 years old. Their new home adjoined the school’s property. Children didn’t pack lunches anymore, and the “proverbial dipper” for the schoolhouse was located right in the middle of the yard. School children joined to quench their thirst at the Kerlee home at lunch and recess. B.K. recalled her teacher scolding her and her siblings for taking it easy now that they lived in town. The teacher reproached them: “When you Kerlee children had to walk two miles you were never tardy. Why is it you can’t cover that short distance across the schoolhouse flat and get to school on time?”  

22
Water rights were valuable in the semi-arid valley. Crop irrigation in Darby depended on ditches. James Kerlee dug the thin streams of water on his property. He hiked into the Tin Cup range of mountains to discover a high-mountain lake, Farmers Lake later named Kerlee Lake. He converted it into a rock-walled reservoir to provide better irrigation. 70

James Kerlee also helped tend the Waddell Ditch, which flowed five miles through his new property and the acreage of neighbor John Waddell. Before they opened the headgates every year, James and John trekked to clear the Waddell Ditch. B.K. recalled the annual ritual:

No telephones then but here would come John Waddell in his two-horse buggy. It would go like this:

“Howdy Jim,” and “Glad to see you John.”

Then, “Jim, I thought maybe we better drive up and see about the ditch work” and my father would quickly assent, drop whatever he was working at, and off they went, shovels and maybe a pick in the back of the vehicle. 71

The ditch ran the full length of the homestead. James and Mary Kerlee planted cottonwoods along the north bank. Those trees can still be seen at the former Darby Lumber Mill site just north of town. B.K. pleaded in a column for the continued existence of the ditch. With charm, she wrote:

It was often said that Jim Kerlee and John Waddell “can make water run up hill if they put their feet on shovels.”

One of the tools that went along on the springtime ditch-cleaning was father’s treasured spirit level and its bubble of truth was the pattern for both of them. … There are still oldtimers who can recall “goin’ swimmin’ in the Waddell Ditch.” Bring it back to its status as a useful part of the landscape, please. 72

Before they could build their new home, the Kerlees stockpiled lumber as they could afford it. The kids turned the pile into a fort. B.K. recalled:
We children made the most of the space between the piles for a first-class playhouse with only the sky for a roof, but with sturdy walls and places for shelves to hold our cracked dishes and tin cups for play dinners. ... There was a glory of domain on the hard dirt floor with its rock partition lines and it was ours to enjoy.  \(^73\)

After a year of turning the lumber pile into an imaginary home, the family built a real one. With extra room, the Kerlees would eventually board school teachers.

Much later, two of her older brothers drove stagecoach and stopped at the home. Mary Sally set two tables for meals, and in later years cooked for an additional six men who built the Northern Pacific railroad station in Darby. Stagecoaches provided communication and transportation to any part of the world outside Darby. Mail with about six passengers a day moved between valley towns.

However, B.K. rarely left the Bitterroot Valley. When she did for a short trip—business or pleasure—she headed into the woods in a wagon. When she was young, her family enjoyed day wagon rides and occasional overnight excursions. As she got older, her and friends took camping trips with covered wagons filled with supplies.

An annual Fourth of July adventure to Medicine Hot Springs and the Medicine Tree, a sacred Salish site, proved enticing. Children bundled in quilts sat in the flat back of the wagon, while Kerlee parents took the front spring seat. \(^74\) B.K. recalled stepping off the wagon to search the ground for colored beads at the base of Medicine Tree, the sacred Salish tree that, as legend allowed, once had a mountain goat’s horn embedded in its trunk. The beads had been laced to the branches with string by Salish who returned for worship.
Twice when B.K. was a teen-ager she enjoyed a covered-wagon camping trip, complete with tents and camp-style vittles. She and friends picked foliage and flowers and hunted berries during the day; they told stories around the fire at night.

Huckleberry hunting made a special day trip, with James Kerlee hitching up the team and carting up to six of his children to the Lake Como area. There, he tied a five-gallon bucket around each waist and sent the clan on up the hill. B.K. recalled:

In huckleberry time hillsides gave with a bidding to get fresh berries the hard way, climbing up hills carefully so as not to slip on the slick clumps of bear grass; the effort did away with any idea you were getting huckleberries for free, just because the patch wasn’t fenced.

But there was pure joy in the work to try and fill a five-pound lard bucket, for it’s one huckleberry at a time for the picker who respects the little bushes enough to leave them for another season. I have known some whose method was to break off a bush and get the berries off the easy way by sleight-of-hand, but in the law of the woods that isn’t exactly kosher.

Back home, bowlfuls of huckleberries topped with sugar and cream supplemented supper. Remaining berries turned up in cobbler.

As she became a teen-ager, B.K. developed an early habit of producing and valuing hard work all year long. Late summer and fall she sold garden vegetables and fruit to the town hotels. Then she was off to the market, where she found pleasure in purchasing groceries. "Hands clasping silver and nickel coins, the next thing was the general store where the money would buy certain things like soap or coffee for the household," she said. The store was valued as a common meeting place. B.K. recalled its design:

The old time country store with its shelves and bins behind the counter and kegs of pickles and other good winter keepers in the back room was a community builder and no foolin’, for it was a gathering place for neighboring people to converse while they waited for the merchant to fill sacks or take down shelf goods for them. There was no such thing as a super market with its do-it-yourself customs. This good way of town meeting on market days stayed by long after automobiles came along.
During her final elementary school year – 1901-1902 – B.K. received her first lessons in Latin and algebra because the district for the first time afforded a second teacher. Previously, children learned reading, writing, arithmetic and good behavior from the McGuffy Reader, a national curriculum for basic education and good behavior training which the teachers incorporated into their curriculum. B.K. found the tool helpful and sang its praises in numerous columns about the pioneer school system. She wrote:

I believe our hard-earned promotions from one McGuffy Reader class to another were meaningful, because so many articles, verses and real story material stemmed from classic authors. Arithmetic, grammar, geography, physiology and hygiene, spelling penmanship, U.S. history, all were crowded into every-day classes and I think, all things considered, morale was up to par – maybe even better. Of course a bad actor popped up now and then, but as I recall, most of our teachers managed such unruly pupils fairly well.

B.K. finished school at Darby in 1902 as a member of the district’s first eighth-grade graduating class. The youngest of seven students in her class, she passed the examination with the second highest score. Her two oldest classmates were 19 and 20 years old.

B.K. spent a couple of years working for other families in Corvallis and Hamilton and as a waitress in hotels in Darby.

First, she hired out as a waitress in the Hammond and Tanner hotels in Darby. B.K. recalled Saturday nights as the big whoop-up night for woodsmen who typically enjoyed one day off a week. Saloon-goers often came for a meal through the side-doors of the establishments. Though B.K. avoided saloons, she appreciated the business for her own pocketbook. She wrote:

Yes, we womenfolks were prone to hurry past these oldtime saloons but somehow there was kind of woodsmen courtesy afforded us; the patrons would step off the narrow board walk to let us go by, that is if they could.
“A saloon is a saloon is a saloon” even when it is just called a bar and its objective, like that of any business, to make money. This is not preaching, just a fact that a saloon owner of the long ago, told us in a town meeting of those long-ago towns.

The whole town was livened up when the good, hard-working lumberjacks came in from the camps …. No quiet, homely atmosphere at all.

The saloon keepers were the money makers.82

In the summer of 1904, B.K. spent a week on Lake Mussigbrod in the Big Hole basin. The group of friends took the original Big Hole road, a steep meandering trail that included 18 or 19 creek crossings. It was known as “The Old Immigrant Trail” for native pioneers who crossed. There were unwritten rules about camping and hospitality in the woods. She wrote:

The old trail of the 1860s meant sleeping in covered wagons and pitching tents, cooking on campfires, not always wood for fuel (prairie travel meant dry buffalo chips, I’ve been told.) …

The campfire took care of rubbish that would burn. Leave a camp like you find it was a hard and fast rule. And time was when a cabin in the hills never knew a lock; a chance traveler was welcome – he could pull the latchstring and make himself at home if the cabin dweller was not around. 83

On that trip the group wove their way through the Big Hole Battleground. B.K. experienced the joy of catching a moose out of the corner of her eye while she fished.

But rattlesnakes weren’t pleasant to find. B.K. called them the “rather bossy native wildlife of the area, on both sides of the East Fork River.” The bull snakes – big, black and harmless – were respected in part because they were said to be enemies of the rattler. But a girl only needed “caution and a good aim with rocks or a stout stick” to tackle the dangerous snakes, B.K. wrote. 84 Her self-described method of a girl killing snakes poignantly predicts her life-long method of carefully and assuredly choosing battles while arming herself with the right resources.

During academic year 1904-1905, B.K. moved to Corvallis for one year of high school – combined ninth- and tenth-grade lessons – completing her academic studies. In order
to live in Corvallis - named for the "core of the valley," B.K. liked to report - she worked for board and room. She also walked two miles to high school for the two years of study rolled into one. Her class of about a dozen mostly girls shared a hall in the second story of the school with the seventh and eighth graders.

At the beginning of the school year, B.K.'s boyfriend took her to Marcus Daly's Bitter Root Stock Farm for supper with his sister and brother-in-law who managed the farm. They enjoyed a rich Scandinavian smorgasbord. B.K. was certain her friend's country sister had prepared it, but soon learned to her surprise that hired help had cooked the meal. B.K. was captivated with the concept of such wealth and the family that possessed it.

C.C. Williamson, her high school teacher in Corvallis, taught English and composition. Ancient history, Latin, algebra, geometry, English, writing were also subjects. B.K. did not earn a high school diploma. Geometry was the "bugbear of all" her studies; she failed it. "That ended formal education for Bess Monroe," she wrote. 85 Her geometry book had cost an expensive $2, but all she retained was the rule that the "straight line was the shortest distance between two points." 86 What B.K. retained from math lessons presumed her characteristic method of attacking duties in life in an efficient, resourceful and even stubborn way.

"I was not good at figures, but I loved to write," she recalled. 87

After the year of high school, in 1906 B.K., 16 years old, spent a winter at Medicine Hot Springs tutoring two elementary children – Logan and Roy Bright - who lived far from a schoolhouse. 88
The next summer of 1907 she worked in Hamilton as an aide, helping a former Darby woman who was ill. She lived on South Seventh Street, on the same block as the old Burk Hotel. At noon and at 5 p.m. each day (except Sunday) the mill whistle blew and the men walked home. B.K. heard rhythmic heavy boots plodding past. “And the mill whistle had the whole town marking time. For the big mill and its payroll gave a lot of life blood to the town,” she recalled.

On special evenings B.K. attended the opera house, where the curtain was painted with a south-valley scene, complete with winding road between river and ditch.

In the fall B.K. picked apples north of Darby for several orchardists. She recalled the system of putting the best apples on top:

They were using the face-and-fill or ‘shovel’ pack and I got pretty adept at placing the bottom layer, blossom-end down, then the random filling that meant less concern as to size and show yet still called for good fruit. Then the top layer took care of the show. No matter which of the ‘faces’ came into view of purchasers, each could fool any buyer.

Sometime late in 1906 or early in 1907, a young man named Roy Park Monroe visited his adoptive parents in Darby where they had moved from Butte.

Soon he came across the Kerlee family – they were well known and lived in the center of town, so it wouldn’t have taken long to meet the children. First, he met Flossie, the second-to-youngest Kerlee girl. They dated but it didn’t work out.

Then Roy found himself interested in Bessie Myrtle, the 18-year-old Kerlee girl. They enjoyed each other’s company and shared a love for the pioneer way of life and the woods. Roy wanted to homestead, and B.K. was also interested in starting a family. Before the year was out, they would decide to marry.

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40 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
46 Letter to Paul Kerlee.
47 Ibid.
50 B.K. Monroe, story, “Money makers in old Darby Town were the Local Saloon Keepers,” Ravalli Republican, May 18, 1977, p. 2.
57 Ibid
58 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
70 B.K. Monroe, “Sittin’ and Thinkin’,” Ravalli Republic, June 12, 1974, p. 3.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 B.K. Monroe, column, “Kerlee Place at Northern Edge of Darby Noted as Earlyday Center of Hospitality,” Ravalli Republic, unknown date.
78 Ibid.
85 Letter to Paul Kerlee.
87 Interview with B.K. Monroe by Paul Kerlee, August, 1986.

That winter ordered the boy to keep his head up like a horse. At high noon that day I entered the valley below the Bitter Root mountains, and the Christmas holiday “Homecoming” au the Ravalli Home was a part of my memory. I acted Mrs. Trampus Monroe at Darby. I remember the excitement in the people today and walking up the main street. In a round street many people crowded the doors of the hotel.

A fest of taking place with people being turned away. A man named Dumas dressed up as the President. The youth below the Ravalli Hotel Hotel morning was a different than Darby’s present town. They had visited us most of the years we are here. This city I could think said – “This is too much like the last day everyone said that when we thought Christmas would be ordered.

Ray was an old man who was a very good man and a very good personality, according to his two living daughters, Alfreda and Ada Zookes. Ray was a natural man, Mary Street and W.D. Hayes held to Darby. W.D. Hayes spent 12 years as a territorial legislator before he died. The reason is not known, but George Monroe adopted Ray who was killed at the age of 2, and brought him to Butte where he grew up. Monroe had been a colonel during the Civil War; he when he returned to his home in the South, found his entire family had been killed. He packed up and moved to Butte, Montana, and finally Darby with his wife who also helped him raise the children.
Chapter Three: Married to a Ranger

B.K. married Roy Parks Monroe on Christmas Eve, 1907. She was 19 years old.  

Wearing a veil and a long dark dress, she was the first bride married in Darby’s St. Thomas Church.  

Roy’s parents bestowed on them a fancy hotel stay for their wedding night. The Ravalli Hotel was Daly’s establishment and the finest in the Bitterroot Valley. B.K. spent only one night in it during her life and that was plenty. For a homestead-born woman, pretension wasn’t comfortable. She recalled:

This writer entered the sumptuous and beautiful hotel as a bride. At high noon that day I became the wife of Roy Park Monroe at Darby and the Christmas holiday “honeymoon” at the Ravalli Hotel was a gift of his parents, Dr. and Mrs. George Monroe at Darby. I remember the registration in the hotel lobby and walking up the wide stairway to a second story room. …

A host of tables draped with white linen awaited guests. A man meticulously dressed brought our breakfast. The dining room of the Ravalli Hotel that Christmas morning was so different from Darby’s pioneer hotels where I had waited tables in most of my teen years to earn school money, that all I could think was – “This is too much like the fairy prince stories.” I was glad when we boarded Hamilton’s morning train for Missoula.  

Roy was an average-sized man with dark hair and a loving personality, according to his two living daughters, Hazel Radspinner and Ada Zoske. Roy’s natural parents, Mary Street and W.O.P. Hayes, lived in Bozeman. W.O.P. Hayes spent 12 years as a territorial legislator before he died. The reason is not known, but George Monroe adopted Roy, who was orphaned at the age of 2, and brought him to Butte where he grew up. Monroe had been a doctor during the Civil War, but when he returned to his home in the South, found his entire family had been killed. He packed up and moved to Butte, Helena and finally Darby with his new wife who helped him raise the child.
Roy and B.K. Monroe pose with their first daughter, Mary, in July of 1909.
In 1908, George Monroe delivered B.K. and Roy’s first child, Mary, who was born in Darby. Recovery from childbirth took a fixed nine days, “every time,” according to B.K. who was coached in such philosophy by midwives.

The couple’s first son, George, would be born in 1911 in Kooskia, Idaho; Ada in 1913 in Weippe, Idaho; Ruth in 1916 in Darby; Robert in 1918 in Hamilton; and Hazel would be born six months after Roy’s death, in 1921 at the home of B.K.’s brother, Bert, who lived in Hamilton.

For a short time in their early marriage, the couple attempted to homestead a piece of land east of Missoula in the Hellgate Canyon near Clinton, but must have been unsuccessful because in 1909, Roy hastily took a job with the U.S. Forest Service. It was a tough time, for Roy found himself fighting in the midst of the tragic fires of 1910. B.K. recalled:

That summertime was eventful with its terrible sweep of forest fires all over the northwest. Any army-like grouping of firefighters had an all-summer war with the electric storms constantly “striking match-like,” in timbered wilderness. A sad time that cost lives as well as timber.

Roy returned for his young family and the next mission. He moved his young daughter and wife to his new station on the Clearwater Forest in Idaho. B.K. defended her role in marriage as equal and fulfilling. She described the roles of the couple: “The man and wife team pulled their weight on any given employment for the husband. He received his pay check and then planned, with his helpmate, the budget business. The stay-home-and-work partner accepted this way of life and usually it was good.”

In 1910, with 2-year-old Mary strapped to her skirts, B.K. joined Roy with her own horse for their first year as a family in the wilds of northern Idaho.
Reflecting on the previous summer as the rode miles of blackened timber from the fires, Roy told B.K. how he had to lay down in the stream at night to avoid burning alive. While she had impatiently awaited her husband’s return, B.K. also enjoyed telling of a glowing moment when she observed Halley’s Comet from her home in Darby.  

From that point, Roy’s stints with the Forest Service always included B.K. with babes in tow. They kept their small family in trail, cabin or tent. B.K.’s most vivid memories of her marriage conjured up stories of trail rides with her “ranger man,” as she called him. She considered the topic of her husband sacred. While her writing throughout the years included long descriptions of parents, siblings, friends and co-workers, B.K. never named Roy Monroe; she did not describe her love or ultimate loss. The cherished topic would inspire long accounts about life on the trail written for the Spokesman Review and Missoulian. She culled shorter versions for the Ravalli Republican. But she never ventured into the more intimate aspects of grieving her husband, not with family members and not in news accounts.

That first burned-out autumn B.K. rode 30 miles from Kooskia to the Goddard Bar station. There the couple and child Mary survived winter in a one-room cabin with a gigantic fireplace. “The ranger constructed a folding bed that hung upon the wall during the daylight hours, giving us room to turn around in the small cabin,” B.K. recalled.

When others on the trail stopped for a meal or night’s rest, B.K. welcomed the respite of conversation. She wrote of the quality of the people they ran into:

There is something about the rugged mountain living that builds for honesty in men. Perhaps it’s because they live so close to Old Mother Nature, who doesn’t tolerate pretense in any form. At any rate, it is the code of the hills to trust every man until it is proved that he can not be trusted.
That first month at Goddard Bar, a wife of another ranger stayed with B.K. while the men went out for supplies. This conversation-hungry stranger luxuriated in filling B.K. with stories of cougars that had “the habit of coming into cabins after the fashion of Santa Claus himself.”

B.K. recalled: “That a cougar would have no difficulty in negotiating the low stick and mud chimney of the little cabin, I was certain, and when the men returned from town ... I went on guard at night and day for cougars.”

A few nights later, B.K. awoke to the certain sound of a cougar screaming. She shook Roy awake. “A cougar is yelling out there!” she alerted.

The next scream was eventually identified as the sound of a pack mule braying.

Another adventure hit closer to home on a winter ride. Roy rode with Mary on his horse and B.K. followed on her steed. As they rode a narrow ridge high above a ribbon of swift river, B.K.’s horse, frightened by an oncoming group of mules loaded with timber, backpedaled down the 100-foot barren slope.

Up the hill I caught a glimpse of the ranger whose white face, above that of the tiny girl he held, seemed to indicate that I was a “gone gosling.” I felt the same way about it, but “horse sense” on the part of my mount was, after all, the thing that saved us both from the waters of the river. The steep hill down which we were rapidly backing had a light covering of snow, but was practically bare of trees. Down very near the bottom, a pine of small stature stuck in the hillside. The horse dropped to his haunches against this tree, as much as to say, “Now get off, for this is the only chance.”

Off she went, and down the hill came her husband – he had left Mary with a surprised packer at the top.

Life in the hills honed determination and ingenuity. “And women, if they follow their men, must have courage, whether it is natural or acquired, for the life of the ranger is a hard one at best and fraught with trials,” B.K. recalled.
In the spring of 1911, the family transferred to the Musselshell District near Weippe, Idaho. B.K. developed expertise as a trail rider and wrote:

Trailing the job as a ranger’s wife meant an acceptance of any experience that might come up. I learned to ride horses with all the grace of an Indian squaw, and, equipped with the divided skirts of the period, made many long, tiresome trips over Idaho trails. I recall a woman who insisted on riding with her husband about the Goddard country in men’s trousers. “Think of it!” the Kooskia neighbors said of this martyr for women’s comfort, whose only sin was that she was too far advanced in her ideas of dress. Anyway, I had to adopt the Idaho method of travel or stay out of the hills entirely, so I rode, often with a small youngster before me in the saddle. 18

B.K. gave birth to a son, George, that winter in Kooskia, Idaho. As a six-week-old he made the ride to the Musselshell. The last eight miles of the 12-mile journey were a downpour of rain. B.K. wrapped the tiny infant in her pleated skirts and covered his head and ears, but he howled miserably the entire ride. On the other hand, two-and-a-half-year-old Mary pleasantly rode in the saddle with her father, wearing “a fortitude that was remarkable,” B.K. recalled. 19

The family of four spent eight months at the Musselshell station. In the evenings, they gathered at the station’s newly built office and played the phonograph with other rangers’ families. “Nothing Ever Worries Me” was the most requested tune.

More than a half a century later, in 1969, a gentleman named LeRoy Lewis visited his daughter Helen Lewis Hedman in Hamilton where she had moved with her husband, pharmacist Wayne Hedman.

Lewis noticed B.K.’s byline in the Ravalli Republican and wondered if this was the same Monroe woman he had met as a child back in Weippe, Idaho, about 1913.

Could she be the mother who had left her two toddlers in the care of people whom she hardly knew for several months so that she could join her husband in the woods without the liability of her kids?
“These two small children were essentially dropped off with this family and none had ever met each other,” Hedman said. “My father … played with them and had a wonderful time.”

As Helen Hedman pointed out, LeRoy and his parents had not met the Monroe woman before, though they were obliged to care for the children she left behind. Whether the span of time was an entire six months – as the Hedmans recalled – or shorter, the situation indicates self-centered concerns. All the same, LeRoy, about 10 years old at the time and the youngest in his family, enjoyed playing with the toddlers whom he called Mary and “Buddy.”

LeRoy’s parents may have harbored some reservations – the situation was unusual – but within several months B.K. returned for her offspring.

It was 1969, and LeRoy wanted to meet this Monroe woman who lived in Hamilton. He walked up to the red apartment building and knocked on the door. B.K. opened.

“Is this the mother of Buddy and Mary?” LeRoy asked.

Without skipping a beat, B.K. responded, “Why, Roy Lewis!”

She remembered a narrow-faced man she hadn’t seen since he was a 10-year-old, 56 years ago. B.K. had a terrific knack remembering people, but Wayne Hedman pointed out that people of her era didn’t have the stimulus of television, computers or advertisements. People found individuals worth remembering, resulting in a sharper image of name and face.

“The people of that time … they developed and honed skills of communication,” Hedman said. “And they remembered things. … And they remembered details.”
Soon after the couple’s stint in the woods without their children, B.K. gave birth to Ada in Weippe, Idaho. Roy began to suffer heart trouble and the Forest Service pay wasn’t enough, so the couple left their ranger life.

Roy, six years older than B.K., had been educated at the Butte School of Mines in civil engineering. They returned to his hometown of Butte and Roy began to take classes in pharmacy. In a few years, the family of five – with Ruth born in 1916 – would follow a job opportunity for Roy in Twin Bridges, where B.K. tackled her first written assignments.

7. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
There's so many things I'd write about, if I had the time
An' words to tell about this ol' world's beauty,
But when I stop to fool around and rhyme,
I'm pestered with the thoughts of some awaitin' duty.

Chapter Four: Breaking In

In early 1917, B.K., a thin and energetic woman, accepted her first writing job as a correspondent for the Butte Miner. She had to supplement the meager income of her husband who worked at a pharmacy in Twin Bridges; he worked limited hours due to health problems. B.K. covered Twin Bridges, Madison County, a small community southeast of Butte, as a correspondent for the Butte paper.

There is some indication that B.K. worked for one newspaper in the Bitterroot before the family moved to Twin Bridges. Apparently she provided "local items" for editor Bryan Irvine at the Darby Record before she went to Madison County, according to Miles Romney Jr., Western News editor. But B.K. never spoke of that employment, and remembered the job in Twin Bridges as her original journalism experience.

When she began in 1917, she could not type, so B.K. sent long-hand reports to the Butte Miner. She lacked experience and felt intimidated, so her husband, who was "college educated," she said, helped and encouraged the reporting. And within a year B.K. had her first opportunity to defend her copy. She reported on a terrible snowstorm that buried cattle. At the time, however, it seems it would have been more prudent to avoid writing the story for its potentially negative impact on the industry. She recalled:

I was avid in my new-found line. With friendly advice from a country editor there (at a weekly in Twin Bridges), I kept mailing in news notes. Once in the 1918-19 winter, a blizzard swept the town and valley with so much snow cattle were stalled in it, unable to get out and dying in their tracks of exposure.
My true story raised the ire of the stockmen and an attorney wrote a denial. It was published with Editor Larry Dobell’s (Butte Miner) comment, a simple headline, “Glad of it.”

She was alarmed that the Miner editor would print the letter and its hopeful headline. B.K. knew she was accurate in her report about the dead animals. She fired off a letter to the editor, exclaiming she had written the truth.

Her editor simply answered, “Keep on sending us the news and we will judge the policy.”

Sending the news didn’t bring in a lot of money. Roy and B.K. struggled to make ends meet. Her own monthly paychecks rarely reached $20 – worth about $175.80 a month today. “We did and we did without, like others of our status who surely weren’t the Idle Rich,” B.K. wrote. Then Roy’s health took a turn for the worse.

Meantime, B.K. allowed herself the luxury of a small double-shift Underwood and learned to type. She filed chicken-dinner community notes and had the chance to cover government and a variety of local news events. Twin Bridges was only a few miles from Virginia City. The area’s vigilante history provided lore in which the town reveled. But the lively community couldn’t compare to B.K.’s home back in the hills of western Montana.

So the Monroe family of seven moved back to Missoula. One afternoon, while visiting family in Darby, Roy, 37, took ill. His pain was so severe they rushed him to the Hamilton hospital, where he died of complications related to appendicitis.

B.K., 32 and three months pregnant with Hazel, her sixth, must have been devastated, according to her relatives. Her life would never be the same, except for ongoing financial difficulties. The notice on the front page of the Ravalli Republican on Sept. 3, 1920, said
that Roy Monroe died at the Hamilton hospital the Friday before and was buried in Darby on Sunday. It failed to mention his family members, other than: “He was about 37 years old and leaves a wife and five children.”

“My mother missed him very much,” B.K.’s daughter Ada Zoske said. “But she was too busy raising her kids to mourn for very long.”

B.K. remained in Missoula for a short time while planning her next step. While on a visit to a “Dr. Owens” for prenatal care, she was offered an illegal abortion. “Bessie, you come back and we’ll take care of that,” he apparently said. “It is too bad, but the five are all you can take care of.”

B.K. flatly refused. She thanked the doctor, walked out of the office and never saw him again. In February of 1921, she gave birth to Hazel, her last. Dr. Hayward, the husband of B.K.’s sister, delivered the daughter at the home of B.K.’s brother, Bert, in Hamilton.

Though a small stipend from the Forest Service supplemented the family’s income for a time, B.K. again worried about making ends meet. She went back to her home in Missoula and penciled out how to feed her family. She didn’t want to ask for help, she didn’t want to waitress, and she wanted to avoid “back-breaking hours over a washboard.” With her clips from the Butte Miner, she approached Missoulian editor and publisher Martin Hutchens. He agreed to take her submissions if she worked as a correspondent. B.K. packed and moved her family of seven from Missoula to her birthplace in the south valley. The job in Darby was taken from Mary Milburn, who “bowed out,” B.K. wrote, though there is no further explanation.
B.K. rented a small house in the town of Darby and, during those first two years, moved between a series of homes in the Darby area during those first two years. Though a possibility, she never moved back home with her parents. Instead she worked her way into helping edit the Darby Dispatch, a weekly, to supplement her Missoulian income. 15

B.K. phoned, mailed or wired Bitterroot Valley scoops and happenings to the Missoulian. She borrowed a new typewriter – an Olivetti – from her brother-in-law, Warner Laird. 16

Journalist and author John K. Hutchens encountered B.K. decades later and recalled the moment in his book, One Man’s Montana. Apparently his father, Martin Hutchens, was more than satisfied that he had hired the woman whom he referred to as “The Montana Nellie Bly.” 17 John Hutchens wrote:

Mrs. Bessie K. Monroe, the Missoulian-Sentinel’s Bitter Root Valley correspondent in Hamilton, sixty miles away, phoned and wrote in stories, tips and features with a tireless, round-the-clock accuracy. 18

Another hard blow hit B.K. during Thanksgiving week, 1921, a year after Roy’s death. Her father, James Kerlee, perished in the woods at age 66. As customary each post-harvest autumn, he had hiked up the Nez Perce Trail for a few weeks at his mining cabin. This year, however, he didn’t make it back in time for Thanksgiving. On Tuesday following the holiday his family, preparing to search, received word from a resident at a West Fork cabin that Kerlee and his dog, Brownie had been found. The dog’s howls had attracted two hikers to the spot alongside the trail where Kerlee had attempted to make camp, but died in the snow of heart failure.

B.K.’s brothers headed to the hills. They brought their father’s body by toboggan to a nearby cabin where a Hamilton ambulance awaited. The mortician who handled Kerlee’s
body, John W. Dowling, did so as one of his first rescue missions. Later, B.K. wrote how her father’s steadfast dog offered a goodbye. She created the scene not so much from reality – she was not there – but from her imagination and pieces of her brothers’ reports. She wrote:

And Brownie as he once more saw the body of his master, touched it with his forepaws and gave the dog’s expression of a broken heart. A mournful howl that those who heard, said would not be soon forgotten.

... Brownie lived a year or two after that at the Kerlee place, and then he was seen no more. His home people accepted his disappearance as Brownie’s own way of going off on some trail for the end. He was never found. 19

Her father’s death must have been especially traumatic within a year of losing her husband, but her writing, however intimate, doesn’t reflect the personal blow she must have experienced. Instead, she wrote tenderly of how the dog responded to the death of his master. B.K. also wrote that her father and Mary Sally were wonderful parents, which reflected her own desire to raise her children in their spirit. She recalled:

Money they did not have, but perhaps their good spirits, their perfect health and their determination to succeed, each for the sake of the other, was of more lasting value to them. ... Here, under these difficulties, they raised this family of ten (living) children, all of whom have been spared to them and permitted to grow into useful citizens. A family of ten without the proverbial “black sheep.” ... The growing city of Darby is rapidly approaching their very gates, their ranch is all that could be desired and the voices of their sturdy grandchildren gladdened their declining years. 20

The legacy of the Kerlee grandparents through the marriage of B.K. and Roy were six Kerlee grandchildren. B.K. found herself trying to raise her children and play the roles of both parents. Her mother surely would have helped her, after all, Mary Sally had functioned as an adoptive mother for a number of young kids even after B.K.’s father died. But B.K. did not expect her mother or other relatives to care for any of her children. She decidedly chose to raise them on her own.
The community seemed to admire the woman who brought up her children while working. Help came mysteriously and openly.\textsuperscript{21} Had there been welfare, B.K. would not have accepted, those who knew her agreed. The early part of the century was a time when, her friend Dale Burgdorfer said, most women were too proud to take a government hand-out.\textsuperscript{22}

Fortunately for B.K., a small community stepped forward. B.K. received food, clothes, money, books, and other bits of service here and there throughout her life. She never had enough money to buy all that her family needed, but she always managed to have enough. She used available resources, occasionally offering room and board to a young woman room in exchange for housekeeping and babysitting.

Certainly it didn't hurt having attention because she became a public figure who had the power of the pen.

"She was always just here and there," recalled Zelma Hartley, 96, whose father owned Bitter Root Laundry in Hamilton. "You'd see her there with her pencil and notebook. And I don't think she ever complained about anything. She was just always 'up.'"\textsuperscript{23}

B.K. brought her laundry each week to Zelma's father, Charles Hartley, who owned Bitter Root Laundry. Although she couldn't afford the extra luxury, B.K. received her sheets and tablecloths ironed for free by Hartley, without explanation.\textsuperscript{24}

"Everybody helped her because she couldn't have had money," explained June Howe, Zelma's sister. "We decided that there must have been a lot of community people who did little things to help her out."
For the most part, the Monroe children learned to raise each other. “We just grew up,” Ada Zoske recalled. “We were just a bunch of mopsies; she was always so busy.”

Any lack of consistency from the loss of a day-to-day parent was somewhat supplanted by the responsibility of hard work bestowed on B.K.’s young. Her children helped in B.K.’s employment as well as keeping the household in order. The children learned to pick up the pace at home, perhaps respecting their mother’s effort and likely understanding the necessity of the situation. Her children helped her by running errands, collecting scores for sports reports and taking her copy to the bus stop.

B.K. grabbed any opportunity to write a few inches for money, and her loyalty to the Bitterroot Valley and her town of birth must have been fun to tap for her when the Missoulian editors asked for a piece on the thriving town of Darby for a special section called, “Souvenir Edition.” B.K. began:

To the casual eye, Darby is a typical country village, with its one business street, and its lack of many modern characteristics. The size and importance of a town, however, can be determined only by the territory it serves as a trading center, and by the general progress of the people who call it their home town. Darby’s citizens are ambitious and progressive. As for the town’s importance as a center of trade, the entire upper Bitter Root is largely dependent upon it for mercantile supply.  

In early 1922, corresponding for the Missoulian in Darby, B.K. received word from a Montana Standard correspondent in Hamilton that the Butte daily needed a Darby school feature story. B.K. agreed. She interviewed school officials and produced a piece about the new school building. She finished on deadline.

“I wrote that story with a pencil, and the Hamilton reporter sent it, with my byline and a picture, to The Standard,” she recalled with pride. “That was my first real feature story.”
B.K.'s confidence in her ability expanded. She began to produce an extra set of Darby news briefs, sending them to Ravalli Republican publisher J.C. Conkey. He published the news items. Each month he rewarded her with $2 for postage.

B.K. enjoyed earning money and respect from several news organizations for doing what she creatively produced out of the reality of her own community. She belonged to no one, in essence, and was the voice for many. And so began her career of juggling copy for several papers at a time. "The newness of it all had its trials, yet it got under my skin and so began yearly reporting jobs for other papers, too," she wrote.

B.K. took her work seriously. She dressed professionally with a conservative edge and honored her commitments to the community and its employers. She often donned a black hat, topping off her intense expression. The hat became a trademark article of clothing for those who saw her walking quickly through town. She considered herself a vehicle for information passage between the people of her community, whom she held in high esteem.

B.K.'s children succumbed to deadlines as the driving force in their lives. News was an all-hours business; without complaint B.K. worked all hours and reported seven days a week. Her primary employer - a newspaper that needed daily copy - forced her devotion to producing daily copy, whereas most journalists in the area wrote for weeklies. The more she covered and produced, the longer the story, and the heftier the paycheck she added to her Ravalli County Bank account for quick drain. She accepted the cycle. It produced intermittent rewards that tasted good enough to keep up the pace.

In early 1922, B.K. broke the news of an oil strike in Corvallis, though due to the disagreeable result of the strike which turned out to be a fraud, she never referred to the
series of stories as her first big scoop. The descriptive and eloquent style of writing was
gospel for the time, but especially for B.K., who enjoyed even including her own role in
the stories she covered. The strike at Corvallis found its way to the front of the
Missoulian, stripped across the top. It said:

News of the strike late yesterday afternoon spread like wildfire and machines
loaded with excited men rushed to the field. Later in the evening a celebration of the
event was held in the offices of the company.

Commenting yesterday on significance and possibilities of the strike, Edward W.
Brown, son of “Sandbar” Brown, declared, “I am not in the oil game, but I have
visited fields in Montana, Texas, Wyoming and California. The indications of
overlaying strata here are good. Things look favorable.”

“Sounds good to me,” asserted Mayor J.E. Totman of Hamilton.

J. S. Inman, rancher and proprietor of several stores here and at Butte, declared, “I
think they have struck it and absolutely believe there is oil in the valley. If I did not
think so, I would not say it; I have not a cent of stock in the enterprise.”

B.K. tested the oil herself as further proof for skeptical readers. She added:

Oil was the popular topic on the streets, in the cigar stores, hotels and cafes, today.

... A portion of the brown scum, which floated on the pit where the ice was broken,
was scooped up in newspapers, the water shaken off and a match applied. The
substance burned fiercely. The Missoulian correspondent, among others, made the
test.

B.K. thoroughly covered the story in the following months: potentially hazardous gas
pressure; the lines of automobiles that drove to the site of the drilling for a look at the
action; ownership development as the company manager, J.L Wildin, offered double
shares to present stockholders; the fake rumor of a gusher that spread through the
valley like wildfire; the clang of the drill inspiring the Corvallis residents; the lost
drill that was recovered; the University of Missoula professor who came to furnish proof
that a flowing oil well had been truly discovered.

Perhaps the beauty of her story, besides the fact that it was probably her first major
coverage, lies in what she told 60 years later about the strike. The fake oil strike could
not have been predicted, even by the reporter who led the sensation. Her later writing calls the stockholders gullible, but B.K. the rookie reporter could not have been more gullible herself. Still, who wouldn’t have been? She recalled:

The time was right for a banquet to celebrate and a good many stock certificates were sold on the evidence of this promoter that crude oil had seeped into the gravel of the fairly deep well.

Memory is a bit hazy as to who threw the party, probably stockholders assisted by the chamber of commerce. I covered the momentous meeting, which I seem to recall took place in Corvallis.

The out-of-state well driller was lion of the evening.

There was a most gullible dinner company and when the lion got to his feet and began to orate about the discovered oil in the Corvallis diggings cheers were loud from every trusting valley backer of the oil well.

I distinctly recall the speech of the clever well-driver. He cited all his day-to-day work and ended his speech with the assertion – “There’s oil in that well or I’m the biggest ham in the Bitter Root Valley.”

He really hammed it up and the natives swallowed it hook, line and sinker.

There was oil in the well, yes, but it had been poured from a barrel and within a week the biggest ham in the Bitter Root had shaken the valley dust from his feet and disappeared.

B.K. reported the stories of those who tried and failed. The oil well, for example, she covered with great zeal – front page Missoulian with a huge headline stripped across the top at a time when the lead story in the Missoulian was typically of national or international flavor. Here B.K. scooped a terrific story early in her career – it was probably her first big news – but she never referred to her role.

B.K. didn’t intend to break ground for women reporters. She did not finish high school or take higher education. Her schooling, she said, was “so skimpy we don’t need to talk about it. What I know, I got the hard way.”

She had always been attracted to English literature and writing. During the one year of high school, she wrote little stories about her classmates, calling the samples “generals.”
Frank Brutto, late AP correspondent who lived in Hamilton after he retired with his wife, Sallie Brutto, who then reported for the Ravalli Republican, said B.K.’s insecurities were assuaged after she expressed them to A.L. Stone, first dean of the University of Montana’s School Journalism. 40

Stone visited Hamilton and came to know B.K., who called him a “good friend.” He leveled with her during an early, tough time of reporting. She recalled:

I told him one day, “Dean Stone, if I ever get my kids raised I sure would like to come down there and take some (classes) from you.”

He said, “Bessie, you’re getting the best education anybody can get right here in this county seat.”

So I gave up then. I knew I had to work harder than ever to learn the job and I have. 41

“She said this bucked her up, convinced her she was qualified to continue in her work,” Brutto told an interviewer. 42

Her confidence in her ability to do a good job did not falter. But her lack of formal education and journalistic training materialized in her writing: a penchant for avoiding the article “the”; tangential run-on sentences; an everyday flair for creating quotations – even from historical figures with whom she never spoke; a comfortable ease with inserting her own opinion in a story or even her own name if she happened to be a part of it.

B.K. Monroe began to write because she had children to support. But she maintained and enjoyed her journalism career because she was interested in the dynamics and history of her community. Describing the timeline of her career to an oral historian, she said, “I always worked ... because I loved people and I wanted to be among people.” 43 She said she knew from the start of her writing career that it was the only job for her. She willingly sacrificed time with her kids and the opportunity to meet men who might help
her raise her family by being a busy news reporter at a time when women did not do that. B.K. was professionally employed when "a woman was supposed to be in the home," recalled her grand-niece, Helen Bibler.

Journalism wasn't a common career choice for women in 1920. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women reporters were typically confined to writing for the women's pages. Often they wrote stunt or "sob sister" articles revealing some wrong in society. There were about 12,000 women journalists in the United States in the 1920s, an increase over the estimated 500 women on the editorial side of newspapers in 1886. Survey numbers may have been deflated, however, according to author David Dary, who wrote that many women involved themselves in reporting, typesetting or proofreading as helpers to husbands during the end of the 19th century.

Newspapers weren't geared at all for women until the second half of the 1800s when publishers began to recognize that women made purchases for the household. But in no time a tiny women's corner would become a feature page all its own — a lifestyle or women's page — and then a feature section. "Society writing opened the door of opportunity in newspaper work for women," wrote Genevieve Jackson Boughner in her 1926 textbook for aspiring women journalists.

Had B.K. gone to journalism school at the time she began reporting, this relatively progressive textbook for women journalists in 1926 would have limited her scope to society editor, club reporter, homemaking writer, fashion scribe, beauty oracle, adviser, columnist or teacher. B.K. would have found that of the book's 18 chapters, just two short ones addressed the role of women reporting on sports, with credit for the
development given to the "outdoor girl" on the scene, or the role of women reporting on politics, with credit attributed to the advancement of the suffrage movement. 48

Headlines also illustrated a changing newspaper coverage of women in politics during the four-year period from 1920, when B.K. started writing for the Missoulian, until 1924, when she had several newspapers on her docket of free-lance work.

From 1920, Boughner found the following headlines:

Awful Dangers of Women Suffrage
Too Refined to Think
Peroxide Vote
How is Your Cook Going to Vote? 49

From 1924, headlines included:

Women in the Washington Scene
Women and International Affairs
Towns Run by Women
Holding Office on Main Street
Committee Women and County Chairmen in the New Politics. 50

The staggering difference developed after the passage of the 19th Amendment in Congress in 1920, and the desire of the two major political parties to enlist women and, of course, their votes. 51

In 1917, Montana’s own Jeannette Rankin became the first woman to serve in the U.S. Congress, and she fought for women’s right to vote. A year later, B.K. would start reporting and later come to know her.

In the 1930s, Eleanor Roosevelt helped bring women into the mix of media and politics. She only allowed women reporters at her press conferences, for example, requiring Washington newspapers and bureaus to hire at least one woman to cover her affairs. So women began to explore reporting jobs outside of the women’s page. 52
While World War II helped facilitate this, after it ended, men returned for their jobs and women went back to work on the women’s page, if at all. 53

Only a few women in the early 20th century broke into hard-news reporting or worked as editors, helping define the news. 54 B.K. did both as a single mother. She told an interviewer:

Life isn’t a bed of roses for a country newspaper worker, I’ll tell you that. But that’s all the more reason for keeping at it.
‘Course I wanted to see all my children, to see them get high school diplomas and I did — all six of ‘em. But they were good, they were, and I had lots of good friends and of course some fine family people too — relatives. 55

While necessity forced B.K. to generate a job in journalism, the momentum that carried her through a long and successful career was born of her own ability to learn, talent and tenacity. “You can go a long way with your desire if you want it bad enough, that’s for sure,” she once said. 56

B.K.’s took her first and only full-time permanent job in August of 1922, when publisher J.C. Conkey offered her work as a reporter for the Ravalli Republican. 57

B.K. agreed to pick up and move her family to a sparse Hamilton rental where the family didn’t have indoor plumbing. 58

This transition to the Ravalli Republican initiated a three-year break from her employment with the Missoulian. But it also landed her the job as Bitterroot correspondent for The Montana Standard.

J.C. Conkey owned and edited the Ravalli Republican, located at the corner of Third and Main streets in Hamilton. Here the paper had been located since 1889, and with Conkey at the helm since about 1915.
Her first day on the job, B.K. walked directly to the Ravalli Republican office in a clean dark outfit with simple jewelry. The front of the building was accessible to the public by walking up three steps. Two wide glass display windows allowed light and a view of busy downtown Main Street. B.K. entered the building.

Conkey, at his front-office desk, welcomed her and introduced her to a small reporter's desk, also located at the front of the office. "You will be the city editor from now on at $10 a week," he told B.K. Fifty dollars a month helped the family purchase food and shelter. But even in 1922 the pay was only worth about $352 a month in today's currency.

Pay for women journalists paled compared with the pay of men. In 1935, for example, the median salary for female reporters in the U.S. was $26.50 a week, 16 percent lower than their male counterparts. While married women's salaries at newspaper jobs tended to be less than single women, B.K. still only earned the equivalent of $2.20 an hour.

In 1920, a pound of coffee or Hershey's baking chocolate at the local grocery store cost 45 cents, and a 49-pound sack of new wheat Ravalli Flour cost $3.35 – more than an hour's pay.

B.K. shopped on her way home from work or on the weekends. The local market on Main Street offered credit, so the children also shopped for the family, according to B.K.'s daughter, Ada Zoske. They learned to be frugal, but on the day once a month that B.K. paid off her account, the market man gave the children a bag of candy, Ada recalled.

In 1920, a cheap professional dress on sale cost $18.75 at McCrackin & Cresap in Hamilton. Back-to-school shoes for kids cost $3 to $5 a pair. School stockings cost...
about 50 cents for boys and 60 cents for girls. To simply shoe all of her children would’ve cost B.K. roughly $27, or, about three weeks’ pay. But somehow, with second-hand clothing and hand-me-downs, her children had things to wear to school.

“Mother was the ultimate manager,” daughter Ada Zoske said. “She was always in debt, but she always managed to crawl out.”

B.K. recalled her ability to care for her children with a certain pride:

I had six fine “Kerlee-Monroes” Mary, George, Ada, Ruth, Robert and Hazel to bring up and they each graduated from Hamilton High School – and worked too. We made it after all.

But the news world never had money-paved routes that let us in for rich lives – but we had a life style that we had to earn and … it was good for us – after all.

Any extra money bought books, reference manuals or other learning materials, her children and grandchildren recalled.

“We always had a house full of kids, we always had hand-me-downs, we always had to spell right and use good English,” recalled daughter Ruth Swarens.

At home, the children cooked for each other. Ada Zoske recalled the morning ritual of her mother dashing off to chase a story down, leaving the youngest unfed.

“Well, what should we feed Tootsie (Hazel)?” she hastily would ask her mother.

“Oh, cook her an egg,” B.K. would reply.

Zoske became the cook at a young age and learned to be creative with a limited supply of meal options; she said it didn’t bother her.

“I was cooking all the time when I was 7 or 8 years old,” she recalled, “making macaroni and cheese, potato soup. We just had to help out as much as we could.”

B.K. later explained the result of her labors to an audience who had honored her with a community service award. “I had six kids to care for. You see one of them sitting over
there,” Monroe said, pointing to her daughter, Ada Zoske, “and you see she’s not very
fat.”

Years later, a sense of humor about a life that wasn’t an effortless balance for her
children also depicted B.K.’s apparently smooth reconciliation of the consequences of
devoting herself entirely to her job more than she gave of herself to her family. She
loved her children – that was apparent in her letters to them until the day she died – and
she also desired their approval, later sending columns and stories to those who had
moved away. On the other hand, B.K. lived in a time when role models for her lifestyle
simply were not around. Women who could gracefully navigate the balance of career
and motherhood and without a husband did not exist to impart any wisdom. B.K. paved
her own way and in many ways, family members agreed, did her best for all the right
reasons: a love of her work and determination to raise her kids.

The youngest, Hazel Radspinner said she was grateful her siblings helped raise her.
Her sisters were more available in many ways than her mother, whom she remembered as
determined and free. “She was a driven woman. She loved to work. She loved to write,”
Radspinner said. “She was the first liberated woman.”

Liberated in the sense that she was free to pursue her career, but limited in the sense
that she navigated her life without guidance.

B.K. didn’t mind being the only woman in the newsroom. She managed a steep
learning curve, editing copy of valley correspondents, selling advertisements, taking
news items at the front desk, bundling papers on Thursdays, and “hoofing it” to the
courthouse, City Hall and other government offices to get the news.
B.K. liked the intense day-to-day work. One of her first reporting assignments to get acquainted with public buildings began with a trip to what she thought was City Hall. A half-block south of the Ravalli Republican office, she approached the first looming building on her right, which required climbing a long series of steps.

B.K. had often passed the brick structure and assumed it held government offices. This must be City Hall, she told herself as she stomped up the steep staircase in her black, lace-up boots. At the top she found the door locked.

Clearly she had not found city government, and B.K. turned on her heel to march back down. At the base of the stairs, a gentleman smoking a cob pipe looked fairly approachable. B.K. asked him for directions. He pointed to a corner building down the street with an American flag flying above. From that moment, her helper, Wallace McCrackin, became a good friend. She found City Hall, and she recalled:

The city hall and its chief of police, Jim Higgins, were soon faced and so a country-bred gal began what I thought was city life. City hall and court sessions; records of varied city government; petty crime hearings that sometimes went higher to justice court - all of the city business of life became part of my news beat.

Court proved particularly challenging to cover. “That job,” she recalled, “was a literal schooling for me as to civil government’s part in law enforcement.”

B.K. read her first sheriff’s report and compiled a story that smacked of her own interpretation of justice. Conkey made fast work of showing her what he called the “news way.”

“Just get the sheriff’s story, B.K.,” he urged her, “and what the court does may not go along with it, but it’s either ‘guilty or not guilty’ as to the jury’s verdict.”

Thereafter, B.K. decided to make a concerted effort to leave personal opinions out of court and crime reporting.

58
“Never was a court report to contain a small town reporter’s OPINION. Of course not,” she wrote. “It still was only the reporter’s duty to write official record literally. What the ear heard, not what the truth might have been!” 76

Another early learning experience about the expectations of editors and publishers arrived in the form of a story on the fair that Conkey assigned B.K. in early September of 1922.

The legendary copper king Marcus Daly started the first Ravalli County Fair sometime in the 1890s, basing it on the fairs of his hometown in County Cavan, Ireland, where he had worked on a pig farm before escaping to America as a teen-ager. With Daly’s start and donated land, Ravalli County fairs centered on agriculture harvest. B.K. recalled:

He had a genius for fair-making as well as finance and industries like mining. He put on the very first county fair in this valley and footed all the bills. When his great heart ceased to beat, his memory as a boy who loved county fairs was honored by his widow, she gave an acreage for a permanent Ravalli County Fairgrounds to the Bitter Root Valley people. 77

In the fall of 1922, for the first of what would amount to at least 70 fair stories in her career, B.K. interviewed the fair secretary, Charles Carney, who was more than happy to give a really good account for B.K.’s story. Promoting local agriculture on the heels of the Apple Boom’s rise and fall was necessary to effectively promote the Bitterroot Valley, and with B.K.’s side job at the Chamber of Commerce, she joined Carney in his views. Cyclical agricultural struggles in the valley were the rule of the day, and she wanted to be helpful. B.K.’s story parroted Carney and his aide. Later that day, she brought it back to the newsroom for editing. She recalled the response of Conkey:

And when I returned to the Republican desk, Editor Conkey perused my poorly typed account, then with, “This is good enough for at least a half-page ad,” he hastened to tell secretary Carney the same. He returned with the money-getting order
for a display accounting the promising three-day fair and so, I was kept on the job. ...

Fair reporting instigated B.K.'s fascination with the Daly family. She learned of the history of his contributions to the community, and researched the development of her new town. "Hamilton was a one-man dream come true," B.K. wrote. This was true as far as the copper king's desire and ability to single-handedly develop Hamilton into a town for his Bitter Root Stock Farm and Big Mill. 79

She remained a strong Daly supporter. She contrasted his efforts to the Apple Boom, oil-well scandal and other public relations ordeals in the valley, because she believed he had foresight and business sense. That outlook flies in the face of Daly's behavior, however, which included clear-cutting the trees from the west side of Hamilton and greedily gutting the earth for copper near Anaconda and Butte. Nonetheless, B.K. believed Daly left a strong legacy. She wrote:

In no sense could Daly be called a promoter; he developed land resources and industries that are still going well. The everyday economy that could support working people figured into his planning. 80

B.K. held herself and Conkey responsible for responding to the Hamilton community with an open door policy. B.K. said she attempted to separate "facts and statistics from the run of everyday town talk." 81 She developed a sense of responsibility for her role as the voice of the valley, if not as a promoter. She wrote:

The news world: Where does it begin and is it a bordered, orderly world? Is it confined to newspapers? Of course not. The newspaper is only a winged carrier of communication. First of all, it is a world that people bring about. Even casual neighborhood exchanges of knowing and telling something that is newly come in the realm of happenings. The tongue of one and the ear of another can be a simple conveying of something "new" and after all it is news of a kind. What a mission the town newspaper must accept! 82
With Conkey, publisher; J.B. Ellis, linotype operator; A.C. Mitchell, printer; and B.K. Monroe, reporter; the team worked together at intervals until 1939. The competitive thrill of producing news developed a strong sense of trust and teamwork among them. This came in handy when the paper moved in 1923 to a new location on Main. The move reminded B.K. that many had gone before her and she recalled the operation:

Big presses, desks, ailing tables, the linotype machine, cases of type, paper stocks and all the paraphernalia of a weekly paper headquarters figured in a task for moving vans.

... When the moving time came the latter part of my job became a reality of old files, stacks of back number papers, boxes of collected clippings and goodness-knows-what. Dust has been called 'the bloom of the ages' and let me say, the back rooms beyond the printing department turned out to be storage of the years' gardening deep with gray dust and litter that had been untended for years.

Conkey had a roll-top desk in a corner and the two shared a typewriter. In the new space, the problem became evident in the front of the office which housed a music store. Kids played records "by the hour" after school, according to B.K., who had only a small table on which to work. The noise bothered her. B.K. "borrowed" the music store owner's portable Corona typewriter and escaped to an upstairs room. Soon, though, Conkey built a partition, and the music store transitioned into a Western Union office.

For B.K.'s children, their mother's office at the Republican was strictly off-limits. For B.K., work may well have been more important than anything in her life. On one occasion, Hazel, upset and too young to be in school, broke the rule and dashed into the establishment to find her mother. Crying and dirty-faced, barefoot and messy haired, Hazel ran straight for her mother's desk at the front of the Republican office.
B.K. was not impressed. Taking Hazel by the hand, she walked her to the local barber down the street. Taking Hazel into the shop, she demanded, "Carly, give her a haircut and for Pete's sake, wash her off." There she left her daughter.

"It was really a no-no to go up to her," Hazel recalled. "She just was so dedicated to her work." 87

B.K.'s internal life began to find expression in poetry. In the 1920s, she began to try her hand at writing verse about the things she cared most about: nature, pioneers, bitterroot flowers and, in time, her views on changes in the valley. B.K. did not write about her passion for writing poetry.

"She painted pictures with her poems," Ada Zoske said.

Ada believed her mother began writing poems early in her journalism career, soon after her husband died, though she doesn't recall her mother taking time to write them. Verse probably came to B.K. in small pieces, pulled as a line or rhyme and placed in her notebook for later development.

B.K.'s first poems were published in the "Oracle," a Missoulian column boxed on the opinion page and dreamed up by editor French Ferguson who worked for Hutchens in the 1920s. Ferguson quickly became a favorite of B.K. because he allowed writers a chance on that page. She wrote tenderly of Ferguson. "Everyone loved him, for he was absolutely fair," B.K. recalled. 89

Many of B.K.'s poems were reflective of her parents and childhood. And while her children were probably the first to read her poems, Ada, for example, "never thought much of them until she published them."
During the first three decades of the 20th century, a Chautauqua, a festival of musicians, players and artists who set up a week of programs in a tent, came to Hamilton once each summer. It was the best of cultural offerings in the valley, B.K. recalled.90

Townsfolk came out for entertainment at the Chautauqua then followed-up with a meal at the locally renowned Aunt Tish's boarding house/restaurant. There was also a brothel around the corner from the Ravalli Republican office, and B.K. came to know the owners, Henry and Mammy Smith, who offered occasional community meals for low-income valley residents.

Chautauquas energized the valley each summer, and B.K. was a fan. After they stopped coming to Hamilton in the late 1920s, B.K. reprinted a poem she had originally written in 1923 for the Ravalli Republican. She hand-wrote it into a palm-sized camel-colored booklet.

**Chautauqua**

by Bessie K. Monroe

There's a funny long word
That's spelled with lots of "Us"
Whose consequent arrangement
Gets a lot of real abuse.
The word names a season
And a tent big and brown,
For a whole week each summer
   It livens up our town.

We ease the wooden benches
With cushions brought from home,
As we harken to the wild tales
Of folks who're wont to roam.
Spices from the Orient,
In form of stories rare,
Music, music, music,
To drive away dull care.
We greet our many neighbors,
Who come from nearby towns,
To sit with us and listen
To the enemies of frown.
Our backs may be tired,
But our hearts have lighter grown
For good, homely sentiment
Has come into its own. 91

5 Ibid.
11 Letter from B.K. Monroe to Hazel and Bud Radspinner, June 8, 1986.

The Daily Missoulian will be the Missoulian for these purposes.

18 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
22 Interview with Dale Burgdorfer, Discovery Care Centre in Hamilton, April 8, 2001.
23 Interview with Zelma Hartley and June Howe, Howe residence in Hamilton, March 16, 2000.
24 Ibid.
31 Special, story, “‘Oil Continues: Big Subject In Valley Circles,” The Daily Missoulian. February 28, 1922.
33 Special, story, “Second Test of Well In Bitter Root Made By Company Officials,” The Daily Missoulian, March 1, 1922.
34 Special, story, “Fake Rumor Brings Rush To Oil Well,” The Daily Missoulian, March 2, 1922.
35 Special, story, “Corvallis Residents Are Boosters For Oil,” The Daily Missoulian, March 4, 1922.
36 Special, story, “Lost Drill Recovered From Valley Oil Well,” The Daily Missoulian, April 15, 1922.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid, p. 268.
49 Ibid, p. 252.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid, p. 251.
56 Ibid.
60 Consumer Price Index.
63 Advertisement in Western News, October 15, 1920.
64 Advertisement in Ravalli Republican, September 3, 1920, p. 8.
70 Debbie McKinny, “Lady of the Bitter Root Honored by Chamber,” Ravalli Republican, April 1, 1980.
71 Interview with Hazel Radspinner, Kerlee family reunion, July, 2000.


Ibid.


Hazel Radspinner interview.

Ibid.


I sing as the twilight shadows fall
And daylight wings into dark,
Mine is a meadow song for all,
A psalm of life from the lark,
A worship of country hours.¹

Chapter Five: Hitting Stride

Thursday mornings at the office brought a welcome change of pace at the weekly Ravalli Republican, for it was news day. Printer J.B. (Bert) Ellis was a talented and capable typesetter, B.K. noted. She stamped, stacked and wrapped newspapers hot off the press that A.C. (Archie) Mitchell fed from atop his stool. B.K. developed a kinship with both of these men and they reciprocated with mutual acceptance.

“In the years I found time to study personalities of the men I worked with, and I wish I had words to define the ties that reached from them to accept a woman reporter in what was a man’s world,” she wrote.² The four worked to beat the Democratic Western News — to the racks, and into the hands of readers.

In 1890, Miles Romney Sr. and his brother Kenneth purchased the Western News from James Farris, who also owned a paper in Darby. At that time, other Bitterroot Valley papers included the Grantsdale Bitter Root Bugle and Bitter Root Times — both swallowed in later mergers. For a time the Ravalli County Republican competed against the Ravalli County Democrat, but they merged into the Ravalli Republican, edited by E.A. Sherman at its birth in 1889. J.C. Conkey acquired the paper in about 1905.³

In the hands of the Romneys, the Western News proved an outstanding competitor. It fought tooth and nail the onslaught of the Anaconda Company and its “Copper Collar” hold on Montana newspapers. By the late 1920s, the Anaconda Company owned eight dailies and almost 60 percent of the state’s press circulation.⁴ By the 1930s, however,
the company newspapers chose to neglect most local concerns and focus on problems far from Montana. This is evident, for example, in the Missoulian for which B.K. wrote — the main cover stories consisted of international news. With a few exceptions, local stories were tucked inside and brief. They were columns filled with notes and events.

The Western News, owned and operated by Miles Romney and then his son, Miles Romney Jr., was known for its vocal opposition to the Anaconda Company, despite the threat of pulled advertising.

Romney Jr. pulled no punches in pointing to the Ravalli Republican, though not a company paper, as supporting the Anaconda Company’s politics and policies. It was true, according to B.K., that “Conkey was a staunch Republican who seemed to go along with ‘company’ policies .”

Romney and Conkey’s conflicting editorials bred a lively arena in which B.K. preferred her side with Conkey, both politically and philosophically. “Their editorial spats were out of this world,” she recalled.

But when there were issues on which the two papers agreed, she wrote that “they (would) dig in and fight for their convictions together.”

B.K. also knew enough to be loyal to the paper that paid her, which for the most part was the Ravalli Republican.

I was to learn, however, that competition was the life of any trade and certainly, when two weeklies scrambled for community prestige in a small town, the wage-earner learned to look to his bread-and-butter resources.

B.K. wrote editorials for the Ravalli Republican. Judging by style and content, she probably wrote the following. “The Old Fashioned Woman” was a plea for all women to
put their domestic energy into political thinking and help build a better government. She wrote:

There are many women, however, who are not so enthusiastic. It seems a natural thing for such ones to make their homes the center of interest. ... Every flower in their little garden, every bit of furnishing and equipment is the subject of keen concern.

They give loving service to their husbands and children. But the vast and stormy conflicts of politics seem far outside their cherished interests of home. They feel bewildered when they are called to render a verdict on matters that seem far beyond their experience and remote from their interests. ... It seems almost hard to take theses admirable women of the old fashioned type and force them into a form of activity that does not interest them.

... So it looks as if the old fashioned woman would have to conquer her indifference. If she will put the same sound sense into her political thinking that she has given to her home duties she will be a wonderful force for good government. 10

B.K. probably wrote another editorial which illustrated the value of women matchmakers to help bring compatible people. 11 She wrote:

A great many of the more winsome and intelligent girls, splendidly fitted for matrimony and motherhood, never find a mate. It sometimes seems as if their fine qualities scared off the boys. The men seen inclined to pass them by and chase after butterfly girls with lots of zip and pep.

... The young people of today need a wholesome and interesting social life where they can meet the very best of their own type.

... This country needs not merely to Americanize foreigners, but to promote the building of good homes. 12

In Hamilton there were two distinct cliques – the so-called “Townies” and the “Five-Hundreds.” Most belonged to the former group. Wives of doctors and lawyers comprised the latter social clique. Members of the Women’s Club and Business Women’s Club navigated high society, as well. 13

“The wives more than the men – they thought they were hot stuff,” Ada, 88, recalled. “The Townies just sort of ignored them.” 14

B.K. was a consistent and loyal documenter of all aspects of Hamilton. She reported on every swath of town culture and retained a special sympathy for the underdog.
B.K. Monroe, circa 1930
When the local licensed brothel run by the Smiths in Hamilton turned up the body of a woman who'd been kicked to death by a client, B.K. accompanied the county sheriff and a local minister as the only attendants at her funeral.\(^{15}\)

B.K. also held a special place in her heart for a local woman named Aunt Tish, a woman who had been a child of slaves but operated a boarding house for children in Hamilton. Tish originally moved from Missouri to the valley in the early part of the century as the nanny for Robert L. Smithey’s six motherless children. After the children were grown, middle-aged Tish opened a boarding house and restaurant that became quite well known in western Montana. She served for about two decades. The Smithey boys, whom she had raised, kept track of her bills and the wages for hired girls, since Aunt Tish had no education, B.K. recalled.\(^1\)

B.K. met Aunt Tish in 1902. She wrote that Tish was a most “entrancing woman,” and helped care for B.K.’s own “fatherless children” when B.K. moved to Hamilton.\(^2\) Tish’s home consisted of a boarding house for kids, and a fancy kitchen for the lunch, evening and Sunday diners. “And so the city of Hamilton really became noted as home of “Aunt Tish” a marvelous cook of good old southern-type meals,” B.K. wrote. “Fried chicken dinners were a special offering of her white linen-covered tables.”\(^3\)

B.K. often wrote that Tish pushed her boarders – children – to be well-educated because she regretted not having the opportunity. With a hint of B.K.'s personal views on the civil rights movement, she wrote:

“You get at them lessons now,” (Tish) would say as supper chores ended. “You want to be like me, cain’t even write my own name?”

And the girl or boy would smile at Tish gratefully, and go along to work on tomorrow’s lesson. ...

Here in our little valley no disturbing talk of integration was ever heard, for Aunt Tish’s great white soul held a command of its own, “Love the Lord and help him with His work for folks that need help.”

B.K. recalled her first interview with Aunt Tish was when she was grieving the loss of a young girl, Marjorie, for whom she’d been caring. Marjorie died after a short illness and left Tish grieving terribly, B.K. wrote. B.K. also recalled the grief Tish experienced when one of the Smithy children, Mattie, died as a young woman with babies of her own.

More than a few of Tish’s boarders earned money while they attended high school by helping with her clientele, who included boarders and diners who came for the meals that were so good, they grew famous, B.K. said. She wrote:

Aunt Tish demanded quality from grocers, butchers, fruit dealers and everyone she dealt with. She served only quality food at her white-linen draped dining tables, first in the Main Street establishment, then for the years till she became too infirm to continue, in her most-loved “boardin’” house jut off Main on North Fourth Street.

Deeply religious and an educator in her own right, Aunt Tish drove her proteges to honor home work in evenings when the kitchen and dining rooms were cleared for the day to come.

Wayne Hedman of Hamilton said Tish and B.K. were somewhat similar – underdogs who worked hard to take care of themselves and the people they loved.

“These women were forced to make it on their own,” Hedman said. “Aunt Tish – the big black woman running the house. And B.K. – the white stringer.”

While B.K. didn’t have money or position to claim a rank in Hamilton’s high society, she was also drawn to the women of “Five-Hundred.” She wrote of their clubs and

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Hedman interview.
society gatherings in the newspaper. They found her connections to both the Missoulian and Ravalli County newspapers handy.

In 1923, after a bit more than a year of full-time work at the Ravalli Republican, B.K. was appointed lead secretary at the Bitterroot Valley Chamber of Commerce when its long-time director hastily left town. Her post probably came about because she had been helping out in the Chamber of Commerce front office as a side job, and it probably was a ready a change for B.K., who never would spent much time working for a single employer. She probably was ready leave her duties at the Ravalli Republican in search of greater opportunities.

Promoting Hamilton was no easy task, but as she removed herself from the Republican, she also returned to filing reports for the Missoulian. In two years she would return to some duties at the Republican, but never full time.

She served as lead secretary of the Chamber of Commerce for nearly two years, from about 1923 until 1925. That job delivered her first major scoop. While working at the chamber she heard word of a highway proposed between Anaconda and Hamilton. As the plans unfolded, B.K. reported on the Skalkaho Highway. Much of her lead story on the cover of the Ravalli Republican was quoted directly from the letter of the Lemhi County commissioner who wrote the chamber with the news. She added:

Four hundred thousand dollars is to be expended on the project, according to the results of a conference held in Boise last week between the state and forest service officials .... The road will connect with that portion of the highway which has already been constructed on the Montana side by Ravalli and Beaverhead counties. Ravalli has built about 2.3 miles of the seven which will meet the Lemhi road at the Montana line near Gibbonsville, Idaho. 17

B.K. also joined the first group to drive over the newly built Skalkaho Highway. At the end of her journey the party enjoyed a celebration in a downtown Butte hotel. B.K.
was surprised by a spontaneous invitation to speak for the Bitterroot. Her story for the hometown paper began:

Home again, but with heads still among the clouds that touch the hills of Skalkaho. The trail that once knew only the feet of the explorer and the Indian, and which was bequeathed to civilization by men who had envisioned a new world, has come into its own as a modern highway.

The spirit of adventure was alive in the hearts of every man, woman and child who crowded into their cars Saturday morning and “hit the trail” for Butte and Anaconda. “Skalkaho” sounded from time to time like a clarion call all along the way and the word proved a magic sesame to unlock the reserve and open wide the doors of friendly hearts. The spirit of the trail was manifest everywhere, and at the trail’s end the people of Anaconda and Butte turned out in crowds to cheer the long procession of dusty, tired, but happy Missoula and Bitter Root valley folks who had come across the hills to visit their new neighbors. ¹⁸

She also wrote about her own opportunity to address the large group. “Mrs. B.K. Monroe, secretary of the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce, was a speaker and was presented with an exquisite corsage bouquet of pink roses and sweet-peas by the Butte Chamber of Commerce.” ¹⁹

B.K.’s involvement with the chamber and women of society enhanced her status at the Ravalli Republican, which supported the agenda of the Republican Party, social elite and, to Romney’s chagrin, the power of the Anaconda Company.

J.C. Conkey drove home that point in a self-serving editorial that explained his goals and agenda in 1923. A community newspaper must advance the interest of its community, he wrote. So in turn subscribers must buy the newspaper to help it advance its agenda for the good of the community. Conkey wrote:

In towns where merchants don’t advertise much, and people borrow newspapers from their neighbors, public journals do not give an attractive picture of the place when they circulate about the state and nation. The more liberal backing given a newspaper the more it can improve. ... Hence everytime you advertise or subscribe for a local newspaper you at the same time build a far reaching agency for community promotion. ²⁰
He went on to offer cheap year-long subscriptions for all new subscribers, with two additional months free.

Even then the scenic and growing Bitterroot Valley carried a charged atmosphere of tension spinning around newcomers, old-timers, land-use planning and big dreams of wealth. The 1920s brought the tail end of the apple boom that had swept the Bitterroot Valley in a fervor of public relations campaigns and use of the railroads by the Bitter Root Irrigation Company which attempting to draw outsiders starting in 1907. But weather, blight and lawsuits never let the dream of profitable apple orchards become a reality. Some orchards were maintained and a handful exist today, but the public relations campaign left people like famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright and others in debt. B.K. recalled the slow reversal of the apple boom:

Orchards did not disappear entirely as trucking and shipping of McIntosh Red apples went on in smaller scale and the home markets were loyal to their fruit-producing neighbors.

The big lesson was that Bitter Root field and meadows crops and garden truck had their undisputed place in the industrial scheme of things. Diversified farming was the valley’s white hope. The years since have proved it.

When it was over, more than 25,000 acres had been subdivided into 10-acre units. A good number of people, some wealthy part-time landowners, discovered the beauty of the Bitterroot. B.K. pointed out that many of these people were university professors from the Midwest impressed with the scenery and access to the forest.

“When they saw our mountains they apparently were of one mind,” she wrote. “Out here there were no plains, just highlands, and so the different orchard projects drew such names as University Heights, Hamilton Heights, Paradise Heights, Charlos Heights and the like.”
Of these areas named with reverence for what altitude they exposed, B.K. picked on Charlos Heights, named for the Indian chief who left the valley in exile. It maddened her at the time and it maddened her years later that the Midwesterners had the nerve to change the name from Camas Prairie. Misspelling the new name proved a double-sin and she wrote:

Perhaps if the name-changers had not butchered Chief Charlot’s name the oldtimers might not have been so critical. But history demands the true name, Charlot, pronounced “Charlot” with the ‘t’ silent. Thus Charlo.

Well, the new-namers took the right pronunciation, but the letter ‘t’ was dropped entirely, and the letter ‘s’ added without an apostrophe, to corrupt what should have been Charlot’s Heights to Charlos Heights. So mis-spelling and mis-pronunciation were twin evils.24

B.K.’s rigid standards for how things “should be” in the Bitterroot Valley originated in tradition as she knew it. At times she was protective or self-righteous about what she decided to be correct.

The young architect Frank Lloyd Wright hailed from the Midwest and drew the design for his only planned community northeast of Stevensville. The proposed Bitter Root town site never made it to fruition. But Wright’s Bitter Root Inn was built on the land and used by developers to wine and dine prospective buyers. After a couple decades of service, it burned to the ground. Ever since, Wright’s town site and other orchard tract subdivisions have presented headaches for county planners. The subdivisions were created so long ago that areas such as the Lee Metcalf Wildlife Refuge, neighboring farms and other rural settlements are threatened by unrelenting development proposals.25

In the 1920s, the Rocky Mountain Laboratory developed thanks to state funding. It would be later incorporated into the U.S. Department of Public Health. It provided the place and means to study the tick-borne Rocky Mountain spotted fever that killed 142
people in the valley from 1900 to 1920. And so lab reporting became B.K.'s favorite beat.

"My own work with newspaper articles has been a heart-breaking job more than a few times. Too many men of ideals paid with their lives, encountering ticks, or getting infected as workers in the woods," she wrote. "The years of seeing people ill from the spotted fever ... were kept track of faithfully by newspapers."

The lab became a scientific ocean of stories for B.K. A Japanese scientist, Hydoo Noguchi, who conducted spotted fever research, had hopes of perfecting a vaccine from a tick-serum source. His efforts paid off in the development of the Parker-Spencer vaccine, and B.K. wrote about this medical advance.

In one of her first laboratory stories, she described the new government facility, in all its glorious amenities, six weeks before it opened in 1928. She described the new lab and twice pointed out the large windows providing plenty of light for research animals. She took pains to assure her readers the dead animals would be immediately incinerated. She wrote:

Everywhere the last word in sanitation is evidenced. ...
The animal huches surround an open court where fresh air and light is always on tap and where sanitation is the watchword. Proper drainage and sloping floors make it easy to keep the place in the most sanitary conditions imaginable.

B.K. set the tone for the lab's descent on the community. Convincing the community that it was a safe and productive facility was no easy task, and she freely seized the role of her newspaper as a public relations tool.

Being a reporter allowed a certain amount of special access, and she used her role to offer readers a taste of what she was capable of experiencing.
On Christmas Day in 1929, the sheriff interrupted the Monroe family preparations for Christmas dinner with news of a murder scene in Victor. B.K. left the turkey in the oven and the kids to make the pies. She drove off with the sheriff, which was nothing new.

The murder scene, though, "was a godawful mess," daughter Hazel Radspinner recalled. She recalled a farmer had found his wife with a hired man. But the story, stripped across the top of the Missoulian with a headline and five subheadlines, told a bit of a different tale – an 18-year-old ranch hand shot a farmer because he was in love with his wife. B.K.'s story included a lie told by the assailant in her presence, and she wrote about witnessing it. Her story included his eventual confession that day from the Ravalli County Jail. Throughout the lengthy story she carefully plucked and placed interesting details. B.K. must have remained with the sheriff and the alleged criminal the entire day.

The Monroe family's head of the household didn't arrive home for Christmas until late. She filed her copy after the family had finished dinner. She filled her story with direct quotes from Hogue's confession. She also wrote:

(Hogue) is a blond fellow about medium height and with a slender, sensitive face. His long brown hair was disheveled and most of the time the officers were questioning him, he sat with his head in his hands, from time to time he helped himself to peanuts and candy from a Christmas dish on the sheriff's living room table and munched nervously as he talked.

Soon after his arrival at the jail he asked for something to eat, telling Mrs. Stokes he had no breakfast. ...

B.K. wrote selectively about the relationship of the newly made widow with the younger man, allowing the reader to draw conclusions. Her story included:

The officers said that Hogue said he had thought "quite a lot" of Mrs. Cowan since last fall when her husband was on a hunting trip to the West Fork. ...

Mr. Cowan, it was brought out, was a very strong man, one of the best physical specimens in the Bitter Root, his friends said. ...

It was a dejected youth who was taken back to his cell. His shoulders sagged. No one had appeared to offer aid. He was left alone to face what might be in store for him.
and he knew from the threats he had heard before the officers took him from the Cowan ranch that he need look for no sympathy from the people with whom he had mingled since he arrive in the valley last June. ... Mrs. Cowan is a slight, careworn-appearing woman. 32

B.K.’s children, besides cooking and missed opportunities for a regular holiday, also were required to take on-the-job assignments to help their mother get the most productivity out of each workday. They weren’t allowed in the office, but they were expected to produce for the office. Her two daughters don’t criticize the work – it was exciting – but they do say it kept them from some extracurricular and social activities.

Ada Zoske recalled her mother calling her to court to collect B.K.’s hand-written notes and throw them on the wire by calling them into the Missoulian. She also recalled being involved on election nights.

“Mother would use us for runners,” she said. “We’d run from polling place to polling place collecting the results so she could have a scoop by getting them first.” 33

In high school, Hazel Radspinner was co-editor of her newspaper, and she would also call the Missoulian for her mother, collect. “You’d give them the scores,” she recalled, “and if there were any highlights, you’d give them those. But there were never any highlights.”

Conceivably the two oldest – George and Mary – missed the attention and the life they remembered before their father died. “But the four youngest, well, we just thought we had a great life,” Zoske said. 34

Montana Trites, a niece of B.K. became a childhood friend of Mary. When the Monroes moved to Hamilton, Trites spent several weekends at the Monroe home.

“I found out B.K. did not like housekeeping - she did not,” Trites said. “So Mary did a lot of it – ironing clothes, household chores. B.K. would leave her breakfast plate and
dish on the table and go to work.”  The scene was not uncommon to B.K.’s children. In fact, those who were friends with Mary “spent most of our time washing dishes and doing a little ironing,” Trites recalled.

After his father died, George, B.K.’s eldest son, had the most difficulty adjusting to the circumstances, according to family members. And soon the pressure of being the oldest son pushed George to take a lead role and help provide for the family. “Now you’re the man of the family,” was the message, so he delivered newspapers for money.

The Monroe clan attended St. Paul’s Episcopal Church each and every Sunday. B.K. had switched from Baptist to her husband’s denomination. Her children played music in church if they showed interest or promise. Mary became a fine singer, and B.K. sang alto in the church choir for decades.

B.K. purchased a radio for the family once she could afford it, and the household actually had one of the first telephones in Hamilton. By this time, B.K. had purchased her own Underwood typewriter, which she would frugally replace when she couldn’t find a ribbon to fit. “She probably had a dozen or so in her life,” recalled her daughter, Ada Zoske.

In April of 1932, B.K. edited the Ravalli Republican when Conkey developed a serious illness. Eight months later, Conkey died. B.K. probably wrote the obituary. She wrote:

Development of the industrial resources of the valley early became a predominant factor in (Conkey’s) newspaper work and The Republican has been a paper with incentive from the first, because of his persistent work for progress for the valley.
Soon, linotype operator J.B. Ellis leased the paper and became publisher, keeping Mitchell as printer and B.K. as correspondent. B.K. also took on editing responsibilities as well as sporadic editorial writing. The following spring, March of 1933, she won the “best-editorial” prize in Montana for urging people to purchase Christmas seals from the Montana Tuberculosis Association. The $15 award was more cash than she made in a week.  

In 1932, the county sheriff was accused of murdering a school teacher, and B.K. wrote the story in place of the usual writer — a story picked up by the AP. She kept up the momentum, and the AP would be a feather in her newspaper cap for the next 36 years.  

It was only a matter of time before The Spokesman Review and the Great Falls Tribune counted on B.K. for Ravalli County filings. She also wrote for a half-dozen independent weeklies at different times in her early career.

Ada Zoske said her mother pounded out daily copy, then telegraphed it to the AP, Great Falls Tribune, Spokesman Review and / or the Montana Standard; mailed copy to the Missoulian; and walked it to the Republican and / or Western News offices.

Trites said her aunt’s work kept her so busy that she didn’t have time for something frivolous such as dating men after her husband died. But Zoske recalled B.K. spending time with a certain Forest Service worker for about a decade. Zoske recalled his name as “Mr. Dahl.” He moved when his government job took him elsewhere, Zoske recalled.

But Dahl’s sister remained close with the family and joined B.K. for Christmas occasionally. If B.K. had any other romances, “she didn’t let people know about it,” her daughter said.
B.K. never owned a home. Her family lived in rentals on Third, Second and Seventh streets and Bedford, near City Hall in Hamilton. In 1939, the Hamilton City Directory lists B.K. as an “editor.” She stood out among other female professions listed with surnames beginning with ‘M’ including three maids, three housewives, a nurse and a clerk. Ten years later, in 1949, the directory listed B.K. as “reporter.” This time the ‘Ms’ included two biological aides, an ironer, a clerk, a teacher, two widows, two hospital aides and a cook.

By the 1930s, she worked her way into the paper that had been her competitor, the Western News, while maintaining a good relationship with the Republican publisher Ellis and staff. She filed stories for the Western News while Miles Romney Sr. backed off from his lead role.

From 1935 to 1937, B.K. took over as editor of the Western News. She edited the paper while Walter Rothe, a German immigrant, published and leased the publication from Miles Romney Sr. B.K. recalled:

My job on press days, each and every Thursday was to take the finished four-leaves making eight pages from the folder to the mailing table and help with the mainling, then tote the several small bundles of weekly news and records to the biggest window of the post office. Different postal clerks or maybe the postmaster himself would accept my bundles.

Miles Sr. still made frequent appearances in the newsroom and was “a kindly character with his crew,” B.K. remembered.

B.K. helped save the Medicine Tree, a sacred Salish site located about 10 miles south of Darby on U.S. 93, during the construction of the highway over Lost Trail Pass in the 1930s. The Medicine Tree, a legendary place, still stands with a tale from long ago. It seems a coyote and a ram were joined in a battle of egos. Showing off his strong and
sturdy horns, the ram charged uphill full speed at a young pine tree – but stuck himself in the trunk. There the ram, one horn deeply embedded in the pine tree, met his demise.

The single stuck horn remained in the tree, a symbol to warn of bragging. 46 B.K. wrote:

Medicine Tree still stands proud on the East Fork Trail of the Bitter Root, and even yet passing Indians pause to hang bead offerings to the Great Spirit in Medicine Tree, a ponderosa (yellow) pine that foresters say is at least 400 years old. 47

Bertie Lord, area homesteader, well-respected photographer and close friend of B.K., saw the Medicine Tree on Oct. 7, 1882, when he was 12 years old. He witnessed the large mountain sheep horn imbedded in the side of the tree, about 6 or 7 feet above ground. He told B.K.:

This tree was held in great reverence by the Indians and every time a band of them would pass they would leave some gifts on the tree. I have seen some very fine pieces of bead work that white men have taken off from this tree. … 48

In the early 1890s, a vandal cut the horn off at the bark’s edge, but a small part of it stayed inside the trunk – still visible.

B.K. compiled research and interviews on the Medicine Tree, and several people claimed first-hand knowledge of the horn – that they saw or felt it in the tree, including Alexander Ross in 1824; Peter Skene Ogden in 1825; Warren A. Ferris in 1833; James A. Jergenson in the late 1800s; and L.W. McWhorter, author of Yellow Wolf, who said he could stick his finger in the tree and feel what he took for the horn until the tree eventually closed up around it. 49

B.K. researched Medicine Tree for years, initially because she was concerned that the construction of the highway into Idaho threatened the tree’s existence. But also because, as a young girl, she had stopped at the tree to collect beads from its base, and admire new sets of colorful strings dripping from the old branches.
Bertie Lord and B.K. were instrumental in saving the Medicine Tree. B.K. wrote:

Word went out that Medicine Tree would be cut down because it was in the right-of-way. But old-timers banded together, and with newspaper help, persuaded the highway engineer that Medicine Tree need not be destroyed.

It still holds forth today as a wayside shrine for the Indians. Bertie Lord was a leader in the Medicine Tree cause.50

At the start of 1937, Romney Jr. returned to Hamilton to take direction of the Western News. He was never part of the established social structure in Hamilton, which was dominated by the business people, the Chamber of Commerce, and people “who did not want to upset the status quo,” according to his wife, Ruth Romney, in a 1982 interview. 51

B.K. continued to write some for the Western News. She respected Romney for his devotion to journalism and integral role in the community. Romney respected B.K. for her knowledge of the community’s history and her competitive streak coupled with an ability to sink her teeth into a story.

They did not share political views, however; and their stubborn personalities got in the way of a productive working relationship. As a result, B.K.’s free-lancing duties for the young Romney when he returned in the late 1930s were short-lived, though the two remained respectful colleagues.

Gilbert Jelinek, 88, knew B.K. and especially Romney during his 39 years as linotype operator. 52 He arrived at the Western News in 1937 as apprentice printer, and didn’t leave until his retirement 39 years later.

Jelinek considered the relationship between Romney and B.K. friendly, but suspected that the exterior reason B.K. left the Western News soon after young Romney returned was because her stories were too long. Paid by the column inch, B.K. knew how to
thicken her wages. “Bessie K. - they called her a stringer,” Jelinek said. “I have no idea what she was paid, but I’m sure she wasn’t ‘over’-paid.

“Bessie could get a hold of a story and she could build it up pretty good. She was hardworking, that old girl,” Jelinek said. “It wasn’t too long before they came to parting their ways.”  

On Thursdays the *Western News* went to press. Early afternoon, Romney took stacks of papers to newsracks across the valley. One afternoon he returned aggravated because he had learned from the newsstand manager that B.K. stood and waited for the paper each Thursday in case she missed anything she might need to add to her filing for the next day’s *Missoulian*.

“God, Bessie, what’s she doing now?” he asked Jelinek. “Tom told me she’s in there waiting for the paper. She goes through the *Western News* and picks out stuff she missed.”  

Eventually, B.K. had a dispute with the man who managed the newsstand and opted to get her paper from the source itself each Thursday. Having been editor before Romney returned and stopped using her copy, B.K. was familiar with the operation. She knew the crew would be bundling papers in the back. She knew a traditional stack of fresh papers left on the front counter were sold on an honor system – if nobody was up front to help you, help yourself but leave the dime to pay for the paper.

“Miles sometimes would see Bessie get a paper and go out,” Jelinek recalled. “No dime.”

While many women in B.K.’s shoes stayed home or performed clerical or office work, B.K. - when she wasn’t taking papers from the competition - was on the street,
completing her rounds or chasing down a story. “Nothing was a problem for her to cover,” Jelinek said.

B.K. hustled from government building to business to acquaintance to event, and this in itself drew a certain level of admiration.

“If you were out on the street during the day you were bound to run into her,” Jelinek said. “She hustled.”

In that light, five years later in 1942, Romney praised B.K. He reported that she knew just about everybody in the south half of the county, and that she was tough to beat on stories.

“Like any good newshawk she is wise to most of the idiosyncrasies of her large acquaintanceship and has knowledge of their virtues as well as their peccadilloes,” Romney Jr. wrote. “She is always on the job and you may take it from your reporter she is a tough one to beat at the news.”

He also praised her propensity for poetry, and when 20 of B.K.’s poems included in the anthology The Badge of Honor, printed by Poetry House in 1942, made the local news, Romney treated it as an exclusive event and included a story on the life of B.K. He began:

Due recognition of the literary talent of Mrs. Bessie K. Monroe, longtime Hamilton and Bitter Root valley resident, is made by the selection …. Bitter Rooters can be proud to note that perhaps more of Mrs. Monroe’s verse is included within the volume’s covers than of any other writer.

Alone B.K. worked on her poetry. Nature and the Bitterroot Valley were her primary themes. The verses showed a love for the environment and homesteading, but the poems also reflected her belief in God and her understanding of the Salish Indians, who lived in
the valley for centuries before the pioneers. Her poems foreshadowed her last few decades of her writing columns and historical pieces.

In his book One Man’s Montana, John Hutchens said how Montana journalists did not appear to age in his 30-year absence. He answered his question by noticing their healthy take on life, including B.K.’s extracurricular poetry. “If they (Montana journalists) still worked, they worked hard,” he wrote. “They also went fishing, read books, took a glass of bourbon over talk that ran well into the night, or, like Mrs. Monroe, lingered over a dish of ice cream and went home to write a poem.”

B.K. credited her work ethic to the model of her parents and favorite editors in a list that included J.C. Conkey and the Romneys: “They taught me, in fact to strive for honesty in news gathering and writing. My parents and early schooling insisted on that principle as well.”

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12 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
18 B.K. Monroe, story, “Over the Skalkaho to Butte and Anaconda: Traveling in Eighty-Seven Automobiles Four Hundred Residents of Bitter Root Valley and Missoula Passed Over the Scenic Skalkaho
Highway Saturday in a Caravan of Comradeship Equalled Only by the Reception at the End of the Trail,” Ravalli Republican, June 27, 1924, p. 1.

Ibid.


Radspinner interview.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Interview with Montana Trites, Kerlee family reunion, July, 2000.

Ibid.

Radspinner interview.

Interview with Ada Zoske while touring Darby, March 17, 2001.


Trites interview.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Chapter Six: Working for Herself

B.K.'s survival skills as a woman journalist were tested in order to feed and house her six children. But the love of the activity — reporting, writing and writing — remained as the top passion in her life.

That year 1940 marked a transition for B.K. Her children, all Hamilton High School graduates, had left the nest to start families of their own. Any grandchilren left to Hamilton were expected to help B.K. in her own children's stead. B.K. filled extra time with community activities, clubs, speaking engagements, and preservations of the Blackfoot Valley heritage. Her poetry began to draw attention and publication. And she lost her job at the Ravalli Republic.

The Ravalli Republic's first official ownership change in more than 35 years happened on Thursday, Sept. 3, 1940, eight years after Coulter died and Ellis had taken his fill of leading the paper from Mrs. Coulter.

New owner and publisher Jack E. Coulter issued an editorial "Statement of Policy," in which he committed to local and fair reporting as an objective answer. He promised, for the present, no change in the paper's staff. He wrote, "Also Mr. Dill and T.B. Ellis in mechanical, Mrs. Bessie K. Mourys another who has served the Republican long and faithfully, will continue in the newspaper department as reporter."

However, it didn't take too long for the new — B.K. and Coulter — to best hands. Coulter didn't appreciate that B.K. filed stories for other newspapers, including the competitive. "Coulter no use need. B.K. didn't like the way he behaved. They were..."
Chapter Six: Working for Herself

B.K.’s survival skills as a woman journalist were honed in order to feed and house her six children. But the love of the activity – news gathering and writing – surpassed all else as the top passion in her life.

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However, it didn’t take too long for the two – B.K. and Coulter – to butt heads. Coulter didn’t appreciate that B.K. filed stories for other newspapers, including the competitive Missoulian to the north. B.K. didn’t like the way he behaved. “They were
deadly enemies,” recalled her daughter, Ada Zoske. “She didn’t like Coulter. She just plain didn’t like him.” 3

By some accounts, Coulter was not an easy man to get along with. 4 By Zoske’s estimation, he was arrogant and chauvinistic. 5 “The expression on his face wasn’t exactly a sneer, but almost,” Zoske said. 6

Under Coulter’s tenure a chauvinistic cartoon, “These Women!” by d’Alessio, appeared at the top of the paper’s front page for about 15 years. It depicted women in at best naïve but mostly dim-witted roles of housekeepers, wives, secretaries or girlfriends making silly comments.

Another example of Coulter’s sense of humor, which probably did not go over well with B.K., was illustrated in the following 1946 house ad for the Ravalli Republican:

**Why Is a Newspaper Like a Woman?**
Because they have forms.
Because back numbers are not in demand.
Because they are worth looking over.
Because they have a great deal of influence.
Because you can’t believe everything they say.
Because there’s small demand for the bold-face type.
Because they’re much thinner than before.
Because every man should have one of his own and not run after his neighbor’s. 7

B.K.’s solution to Coulter was to work madly for the Missoulian, Associated Press and all other papers that took her work, and she beat the Ravalli Republican on stories.

“What got (Coulter) was the fact that she always scooped him,” Zoske recalled. 8

The turn of events pushed her into an even more frenetic pace of providing scoops to the Missoulian. Within a short amount of time, B.K. was no longer welcome at the Republican. She “took her lumps and worked through them,” according to Zoske.
“They had a big snit between the two of them and (B.K.) said, ‘The hell with you,’ and went with the Missoulian,” said Bob Gilluly, who served as editor for Coulter in the late 1950s. “Jack Coulter was a very demanding guy and he didn’t pay a whole heck of a lot.” B.K. juggled several newspaper jobs to make ends meet. And she would not forgive Coulter. Forty-five years later she called his tenure at the paper the “Coulter regime.” And Gilluly recalled B.K. harboring resentment against Coulter.

“It’s a little hard to describe B.K.,” Gilluly said. “She was very competitive and she would carry a grudge against someone who had bad-mouthed her or got something a trifle inaccurate. She held a grudge against Coulter more than anyone in town.”

Her grandson, Michael Zoske, recalled it as marked professional jealousy for both.

“She was a strong, strong-willed person,” he said.

Zoske also said his grandmother took pride in driving her own life and not placating those in authority.

“She had a strange relationship with supervisors,” he said. “I never heard her say she had a boss. There was a woman who was 50 years ahead of her time.”

Women did not commonly find jobs at daily newspapers, even directly out of journalism school, according to Evelyn King, long-time Missoulian columnist and former women’s page editor. Even less common were women without journalism training who worked for daily newspapers. While in journalism school, King was told by a Missoulian copy editor, “You’ll never get a job on a daily newspaper because there’s just a bunch of old men there and they never hire women.”

But King bucked the trend because of World War II. In 1943, while still a senior at the University of Montana, she accepted her first newspaper job at the Missoulian. She
worked the night shift on the police beat, a job available only because men had gone off to war. When her dorm mother grew tired of waiting up, King was the only woman on campus to carry a dorm key. After the war, however, she was replaced, but believed she would have quit to raise her five children. Twenty years late she returned to edit the women’s page.

King knew B.K., admired her work and understood that her demands for respect. “No matter what happened in the Bitterroot (B.K.) covered it for years and years and years,” King said. And if it happened in the valley, it happened in B.K.’s territory. King recalled visiting Hamilton for flying lessons at the local airport. She heard news of a terrible car accident and, wanting to cover the wreck, phoned it into her editor. King recalled:

Of course I was really eager to get the news and (editor) Dean Jones said, “Oh, we’ll get that from B.K.”

I was so disappointed. “You’re going to take B.K.’s stuff over mine?”

“We depend on B.K. and we do not wish to alienate her,” (he said.)

If it was critical or big news, she called it in. They respected her and she was very dependable.

B.K.’s granddaughter, Robin Lee, spent the summer with her grandmother when she was 12 years old. She called B.K.’s essence during that time “personal power.”

“In her body – her body set,” Robin said. “Over time, she ... got bigger and wore a corset. She had personal body power. She absorbed everything with a determination; a singleness of purpose.”

And her grand-niece, Helen Bibler, who shared her great-aunt’s love for history and now directs the Ravalli County Museum, said B.K. was not afraid to ask the tough questions at a time when women did not do that. “To actually be a forerunner as a journalist and not be intimidated by the males – even in the 1960s – that’s got to be pretty ‘ballsy’ for a woman,” Bibler said.
Even in 1961 when B.K. was in her 44th year as a journalist, women weren’t yet admitted into the National Press Club – not even to read the wires. 16 B.K. said she had always supported the suffrage movement, and believed her news choices and copy reflected that support. 17 She also recognized that her wages tended to be less than men, but attributed some of that to the fact that printers were union, while reporters worked all hours of the day and night.

However, she said she would “rather work with men as far as newspapers are concerned.” 18 In a tone harking back to an editorial she wrote in the 1920s, B.K. said women tend to fritter time away with trivial and “silly little things.” She said in order for professional women to make good doctors, lawyers and professors, they must adequately fight this tendency toward the trivial; to “think more like a man.” 19

B.K. also had said that women and men are different – men have always been the strongest physically and mentally, and the latter because women did what they were told for so long. In a careful statement, she said:

I don’t know, I still think that there’s some things that are better for the man to do than so many things that women aren’t exactly physically – they’re not – I don’t believe in women … in combat I think so many of them have had chances to show their bravery in the front lines as nurses and all that and that’s marvelous but I can’t see women in combat. 20

Overall, her statements contradicted earlier stated views that women should contribute their views to politics and the community – and that those were worthy views to contribute – but B.K. was never comfortable discussing the interplay of her gender and profession. In two oral histories she skirted the subject, and moved to other concerns. “You certainly can forget all about sex discrimination and everything when you’re a newspaper writer, I’ll tell you that,” B.K. said. More than anything, B.K.’s views on
being a woman were impacted by her own experience at being successful because she did behave like a man in her professional role.

In the summer of 1941, Daly’s wife, Margaret P. Daly dedicated the first Marcus Daly Memorial Hospital to her late husband. In 1930, she paid to have a small hospital constructed on South Fourth Street. But this new hospital appeared outstanding and modern in its amenities and space. B.K.’s interview with Mrs. Daly the day of the dedication stayed with her as a memory to proudly pull out for the rest of her life. She wrote:

I have never forgotten the picture Margaret Daly, gracious and kindly lady, made that dedication day. Stately as always, she stood quietly with her daughter, Mary Daly Gerard as the daughter’s husband, James W. Gerard gave a most memorable address for this 1931 hospital.

When the dedication talk ended, I stepped quietly to Mrs. Daly’s side to ask if I might have an interview. Her answer, given graciously and with a bit of a smile, was: “I have no interview. I have built the hospital and I hope the people will like it.”

I did not make a note. I didn’t need to, for that simple statement of less than twenty words was a great interview in itself – the humble truth from the heart of a great woman.  

Only a few years earlier B.K. had protected Margaret Daly from a story that the well-known woman did not want published. It was a move that wouldn’t gain respect in journalistic circles today and it compromised B.K.’s view of herself as a reporter that told the public the accurate and complete picture of news in the valley. If she would hold one story to please Margaret Daly, who could prove it was not an isolated incident?

It’s difficult to determine why it was uncomfortable for Margaret Daly that when her grandson, Marcus III, was orphaned, she acquired a ward for him. Perhaps the story would have created a perception of inadequacy on Margaret Daly’s part. But after it appeared in the Western News – B.K. had been scooped – Mrs. Daly came to the Ravalli
Republican office. She cried and requested that B.K. not publish the matter. B.K. and publisher Bert Ellis agreed not to print it. 22

B.K.'s friendliness with the Dalys extended most obviously to Margit Sigray, granddaughter of Marcus and Margaret Daly. She was the daughter of Harriet Daly Sigray and Count Anton Sigray who lived in Hungary for much of World War II, when they immigrated to the United States.

During the war, Margit served as an interpreter and leader of resistance efforts against Nazi control of Hungary; she also helped protect horses rescued after the war. 23

By 1941, Margit, a small woman who adored horses, came to the valley to buy out relatives and acquire the Bitter Root Stock Farm. The Stock Farm manager contacted B.K., who excitedly came to the ranch to meet Daly's granddaughter Margit. "A slim, friendly girl greeted me on that visit which was not the first she had made to the Bitter Root estate of her grandparents," B.K. recalled. 24

The pair enjoyed an immediate familiarity. The countess gave her the Tin Cup nickname she was so proud of, and B.K. was sold on the charming Hungarian woman. "As a Darby native, my nickname of Tin Cup Kid was given me by my dear friend in 1940 by her choice as a loved Bitter Root "Naturalized" by her own heart's choice—Margit Sigray Bessenyei." 25

Margit avoided the media. As a rule she refused interviews. But B.K., who wrote each story as Margit preferred, enjoyed exclusive interviews on Margit's terms. Whether that was useful to the public is questionable, and it impacted B.K.'s work as a reporter. She was rewarded for doing as Margit pleased, and so her writing on the Daly family did not approach objective. B.K. offered sporadic, glowing reports about the countess and
Stock Farm operations. "Margit didn’t like reporters," Ada Zoske recalled. "But she liked my mother because of the way she reported. She didn’t elaborate or make any sensation."

In 1958, Margit married George Besseneyey of Budapest, but he died two years later. Locally, Margit’s efforts included founding the Bitterroot Competitive Trail Ride for endurance riders, bringing a variety of new species to the ranch, putting up fences and generally contributing to the community. For example, she donated land for an animal shelter and Ravalli County Search and Rescue. Her development of the farm drew praise and criticism, though B.K. only wrote of the former.

On Feb. 1, 1944, Coulter made the Ravalli Republican a five-day daily, striking a competitive tone with the Missoulian. But B.K., now 56 years old, kept step and believed she performed a service for the community. She demanded information and respect, and returned with clear accounts of daily news material. B.K.’s talent resided in her ability to meet people and maintain relationships, according to those who knew her.

She tended to relationships and made people comfortable, according to Dale Burgdorfer, who is now 83 years old. Burgdorfer, a tall, shy woman who, by her own estimation, rarely made contacts with others, said she found B.K.’s manner comforting. They saw each other at church each Sunday, and occasionally crossed paths around town. “It took me awhile to talk to people, but I always felt like I could talk to her,” Burgdorfer explained.

For B.K., building relationships expanded beyond the need for resources or good business. She enjoyed the company of friends and strangers. It seems every one in town knew of B.K. though none knew her intimately. Former Ravalli County Sheriff Dale
Dye, whose grandmother had been a long-term friend of B.K.'s, said the journalist did not open up about her personal affairs. About her character he recalled:

To know B.K., you'd think she didn't have a care or a problem in the world. And that's the kind of person that you liked to talk to because she was up. B.K. was B.K. She didn't try to be somebody else. B.K. had a lot of pride. She had old-time values. ... In all the years, I never knew her to have a close friend, but she was friendly with everyone. 28

Her work in the news business provided the perfect outlet for relationships in which she could be helpful and friendly, but not vulnerable. B.K. didn't draw attention to the fact that she was a woman. She wanted respect for her craft without patronizing treatment. She believed her job was valuable and that she was good at honoring its traditions. She said that news was "truly a service to the people, of happenings, sometimes good base for quick attention and quick release. .... News acts as a service to the communities that are the 'home world.' .... News! It's of the People, by the People, for the People. An honored life service." 29

So she tended to the relationships with those people who didn't get in her way, and chalked up her all-around devotion to a love for people. "Newspaper work gives opportunity to meet and to associate with people," B.K. wrote. "People are the power that spin and weave the help of the yarn of business in a town like Hamilton. ... the harvest of a news beat is an appreciated turn of meeting people and getting to know them as friends." 30

B.K. filed her copy at 5 p.m. each day. The most common method of delivery to the Missoulian was by a shuttle bus that carried mail from Hamilton at about 5 p.m. each day. Breaking news, sports and elections were delivered via telephone or telegraph.
At about 4:45 p.m. each day, B.K. tore around the corner of Second and State streets in Hamilton. She had just collected the weather forecast from a man she telephoned at the Rocky Mountain Lab. Minutes before, he would have been outside measuring the day’s temperature and precipitation. And now B.K., envelope in hand, barely made it to the mail stage on time. Jelinek said he witnessed the ritual a thousand times as he left the Western News office in the evening. 31

All methods of copy-running involved the assistance of her offspring, depending on her workload. When her children were gone, the Zoske grandchildren whose parents, Ada and Fritz, remained in Hamilton, stepped into the role.

They shouldered the burden of carting her copy to the mail station. They were required to miss after-school activities in lieu of grandma’s deadlines. Grandson Joe Zoske said when he was 7 or 8 years old he started taking stories for his grandmother to the bus that stopped by the baseball field on First Street in Hamilton late each afternoon.

“As I recall, (B.K.) would call and make sure I was on my way – because they had to be in on deadline. They had to be in,” he said. 32 And he didn’t stop picking up the typing paper, of which she kept carbon copies, until he grew up and left town. His brother, Michael Zoske, had similar duties.

“She was very single-minded about things,” Michael Zoske recalled. “Each night, between 4 and 5 p.m., I would drop whatever I was doing and run up. She’d always have a big, shiny 50-cent piece. Not for me – for the bus driver.” 33

The mail bus reached Missoula in about an hour. Once in the Missoulian office, the copy created frustration for the editors saddled with the duty of handling it. Back then, the Missoulian editors sent correspondents a selection of clean, quality paper on which to
type their news. The practice was a sort of perk, and it also kept copy consistent in size and format. B.K., however, kept the smooth sheets of copy paper for her own use. She filed her stories on scraps, according to Evelyn King who worked in the evenings.

“We had a news editor who used to get so annoyed,” King recalled. “He would just throw her stuff in the air and all over the floor because she would send in items on brown paper sacks and napkins. He swore that she was using the good paper for whatever she wanted.” 34

King surmised B.K. used the paper to send copy to employers who paid better. “She was a stringer for numerous papers,” King said. “She was using it probably to send to the Spokesman Review – that was his (the editor’s) accusation, anyway.” 35

The way B.K. designed an effective community relationship was to offer in the Missoulian a complete line of daily stories; the longest had the most news value and the paper’s editors treated them with good placement. In detail, B.K. listed everything from births to club meetings to deaths to travels and guests; job changes or achievements. She arranged the copy by community (Corvallis, Darby, Hamilton, Stevensville, Victor) and the editors divided it under those headlines. She still earned her wages by the inch, an estimated 20 cents per inch for the Missoulian, and 35 cents per inch for the Spokesman Review. 36

A typical Missoulian offering for the Bitterroot in the late 1920s included the following headlines via B.K., under the heading “News of the Treasure State,” and tucked away on page 3: “Good Cheer Reigns At Legion Meeting,” “13 Births in December,” “Woman’s Club Meeting,” “Oil Company Elects,” “Corvallis.” 37
This formula didn’t change for decades, though its title altered. In the 30s, her Missoulian work was typically found under “Bitter Root Society News.”

In the 1940s, B.K.’s work could be located under “Western Montana Briefs.”

Headline examples include: 75 Per Cent Cherry Crop Forecast; Apple Prospects Good,” “Albert G. Baker Funeral Is Set for Thursday,” “Daly Hospital Gets New Supervisor,” “Ravalli Red Cross Meet Is Set.”

Front-page headlines in the Missoulian are identifiable as B.K.’s because of the (Special) on the dateline.

In the late 1950s, when B.K. was in her 60s, her Bitterroot news page didn’t carry a section headline and her stories tended to consist of basic community and government news. Each story, however, wore a double-decker headline, for example:

- Hamilton Chosen as Meeting Site
  Of Bankers Group Next Weekend

- Hamilton Is Site
  For Women’s Meet

- Chamber of Commerce Out to Bolster
  Bitter Root Valley Economy, Officials Say

- Discuss County
  Library Service

- Burning Permits
  To Be Required

In the 1960s, her bigger stories carried a kicker headline, “In the Bitter Root.” And, for the first time, even on inside pages, the paper carried her byline at the top, an increasingly fashionable move for newspapers.

Some of her stories were crucial and probably even saved lives, such as the time she convinced, in stories and in person, county officials to better fund search and rescue.
B.K. watched a young girl drown in 1953 when a human chain of law enforcement officers couldn’t reach her across the river. According to 20-year former Ravalli County Sheriff Dale Dye, the public considered B.K.’s reporting the reason that the county commissioners supported Ravalli County Search and Rescue and finally bought a boat to help perform rescue operations on the Bitterroot River. The new boat was christened “Rita” and still serves the community today in that search and rescue operators have purchased “Rita II” as replacement.

Besides community members, B.K. found it necessary to develop relationships with other reporters who moved into the valley, and often relied on them to give her a quick ride to the scene – especially when the sheriff’s deputies were not able to take her to a story.

Ralph Owings arrived in the valley in 1954, starting as a reporter for the Ravalli Republican. A generous man who sought the company of other journalists, he also served as a great resource for B.K. because he had a car and made an effort to take her along. B.K. recalled in a column many years later:

The Owings friendliness went straight to the rest of us who like Miles Romney of the Western News and B.K. Monroe of the Daily Papers in Missoula and the A.P. (who) were actual competitors.

When a bank robbery in Victor demanded attention, B.K., stuck at home, tore out her hair trying to maneuver telephoned reports from the bank. Suddenly, Ralph Owings pulled up outside her house.

“B.K., the Victor Bank has been robbed again,” he yelled. “Want to go with me?”

“Yep, you bet I do,” she answered.
Would B.K have done the same for Owings? His wife, Erma Owings, said the relationship was mutual and that in fact B.K. probably held stories in order to avoid scooping her husband who wrote for a weekly.

B.K. recalled the scene:

In minutes we were on the road to Victor getting our news first hand – and together. Didn’t matter if we worked for different paper outfits that yakked editorially at one another and expected scoops from reporters. …

I had my story and Ralph had his notebook full too. The kind of country reporting we knew, meant strictly mind records (historical context) too. A reporter’s head is sometimes filled with mental pictures that scribbling time interferes with. Mind and pencil must do the trick together. 46

She did not ask Owings for favors, an estimation affirmed by Erma Owings of Hamilton. 47 Ralph Owings respected his fellow competition and wanted to help her out, Erma Owings recalled. He once commented: “B.K. Monroe was a newsman, for she looks at news like a man and works that way, too.” 48

Another early evening, Western News printer Gil Jelinek got a call from Ralph Owings. “Let’s go up to the (forest) fire tonight,” Owings said.

Miles Romney Jr. was away at a Democratic convention so Jelinek took the offer. In a few moments, Owings arrived in front of the house. “Bessie K. was in the backseat,” Jelinek said. 49

They drove to the fire and, once at the mountain, B.K. behaved assertively while taking her own time. Ultimately, the more information she could gain from the scene meant a longer story which meant more money. “To her – time meant nothing to her,” Jelinek recalled. “The more column inches she could ship out that week the more she made that week. Even after the kids were gone.” To B.K., this meant hours in the mountains in her dress and leather shoes. “She could hold her own with anybody,”
Jelinek said. “She was out climbing the hills with everybody else. She was always, always on the move and she always walked faster (than anybody else).”  

Later B.K. wrote that she might have recoiled in fear, but the fire left her awestruck. “The scene was tragic, of course, yet there was such grand display of chained fire reaching from tree tops!” she recalled. She reported numerous fires in her career, and she recalled: “It was 1922 when I began quick exits from the weekly Ravalli Republican office to the fire scene. Counting the years does not give a figure on the number of fires.”

In the summer of 1957, a young man named Bob Gilluly, fresh out of journalism school, accepted a position at the Ravalli Republican as a writer and editor for publisher Jack Coulter. “It was a tough break-in period for me, a hotshot college-educated reporter,” he wrote.

Gilluly, new to the Bitterroot where folks tended to be wary of newcomers, ran into a huge barrier. He found B.K. tough to beat, because she knew the right people and they knew her. Coulter applied pressure when, right off the bat, B.K. scooped Gilluly on stories. “She was terribly protective of her territory,” Gilluly said. “When I arrived, she tolerated me.”

Gilluly recalled an incident in the fall of 1957. A local funeral home owner, John Dowling – the same Dowling who, during his first expedition as a coroner, had removed B.K.’s father’s body – hiked into the woods to recover the body of a hunter who had died of a heart attack. In the process, Dowling also died. Gilluly recalled:

We all hustled up to Sleeping Child 20 miles out from Hamilton. John Sr., while bringing this dead hunter out of the woods, collapsed and died of a heart attack himself.
I gave Bessie a ride out to the scene. We sort of collaborated on coverage. Coulter held the paper for us – he helped round stuff up.

Bessie had a little more lead time because she was covering for the Missoulian. Her story was better and more extensive than the Republican had. She knew so much more about the people.

Bess and I got to be real good friends that day. She appreciated me giving her a lift and secondly, I learned a little from her tactics – how she operated. She was on a first-name basis with half the people in the valley. 55

Gilluly recalled, “If she could beat me to a story she would do it with absolutely no qualms whatsoever. She taught me what competition was all about.” 56

With friendship came tips, Gilluly once wrote. “And to a journalist, a tip is equal to having a friend buy you a beer,” he added. 57

Joined by Owings, who was by now a reporter for the Western News, the reporters took the opportunity to shoot the breeze together, a group of professionals on break. They usually went for a sandwich and a beer – “Bessie didn’t drink but Ralph and I did,” Gilluly said – and they’d catch up and compare notes.

Another event in 1962 prompted B.K., Gilluly, and Western News reporter Ralph Owings to schedule a press conference with notable Russian scientists who had come during the Cold War to Hamilton to speak at the National Institutes of Health Rocky Mountain Laboratory. B.K. wrote:

Well, we were on our toes all day and finally in a huddle at the RML, where the three Soviet men of science graciously consented to an interview.

We had done a bit of spade work before hand, but the interview was actually without much aplomb, for the interpreter who had accompanied the Russians here from Washington, D.C. and the main national health center, Bethesda, Md., gave their prepared statements.

... When handshaking time came with introductions, each of the three men from Russia gallantly kissed my hand; I thought – there’s a first time for everything.

... Any way incidents such as a visit of Russian scientists, always keep reporters sharpening pencils or nowadays picking a ballpoint that works – translating notes then to a faithful typewriter.

We newshounds who have “beat the street – and the heat” in past years have met up with many rare personalities from many of the world’s countries, in fact most of them.
... So there are my memories of foreign courtesies and good old American humor.

Within a year, Gilluly left the valley for another news job, but would return in several years to edit the paper for a long period. Owings died in 1962, after finishing a book on public affairs in Montana.

In June of 1962, author John Hutchens returned to Montana after a 30-year absence. He visited his old haunts in Missoula and at the Missoulian office at the end of Higgins Avenue. He found his old co-workers and friends hadn’t changed a bit. He also drove down the Bitterroot Valley to find B.K., the woman his father had hired, who was still at it. Hutchens recalled:

Was there something preservative, I wondered, in the very purity and dryness of this air?

I was sure of it when, a few days later, I drove down the Bitter Root Valley and called upon Bessie K. Monroe, still covering the news there for the Missoulian and Sentinel, and with the same tireless devotion, as she had been doing through four decades. Mrs. Monroe, looking deceptively like a white-haired grandmother, invited me to accompany her on her rounds of the county courthouse in Hamilton, the town the Marcus Daly created to adjoin his estate there. A certain county official was not in his office.

"Where is he?" Mrs. Monroe demanded of his secretary, "and what is he doing and when will he be back? You might as well tell me, because I'll find out anyhow." The secretary, overwhelmed, told her.

"You’re a great woman, B.K.," I said as we walked along to the next office.

"I am a reporter," said Mrs. Monroe calmly.

Time seemed scarcely to have touched these old friends. Was it because, whether still in harness or relaxing, they regarded life as something to be lived and loved rather than as a contest for place and gain?  

Contests for place and gain, like politics, were enjoyed for the fodder they afforded. While B.K. often had her children call in the sports scores, she enjoyed holding her own in politics.

She didn’t avoid activities reserved for men, such as the annual Sportsman’s Banquet which B.K. only could cover if she sat behind a screen.
B.K. Monroe reporting, circa 1950.
B.K. also reported on natural resources and Forest Service matters that were typically left for male reporters. She had spent years as a ranger’s wife, she said, and years on the trail, thereby believing that she was more than qualified. A paperback volume called, “Early Days in the Forest Service,” was one of B.K.’s prized possessions, and she undoubtedly used it for historical reference.

She admitted she had been intimidated during press conferences, for example, when she stood as the only woman in the room. But the material fascinated her and soon she lost her fear. B.K. recalled a conference with the new Bitterroot National Forest Supervisor Guy M. Brandborg:

Naturally enough, Brandy was addressing me as ‘B.K.’—my news nickname—and I was on the same plain with the men newsgatherers always. I tried my best to ‘hang tough,’ but forest service news was so captivating usually, any silly woman ideas were forgotten on my part.

B.K. compensated for her natural feelings by calling them silly and female, minimizing their value in light of her professional concerns. She also believed her ability to control them was a strength that set her apart from other women.

B.K. willingly set aside her objective to report everything fairly, it seems, when it came to accepting a bit of money to not publish basic records. Marshall Anderson, longtime clerk of district court in Ravalli County, apparently sent people to B.K. who didn’t want their marriages or divorces in the paper, according to Ada Zoske, B.K.’s daughter. Although her mother would have done it for any one who asked, B.K. accepted a bit of money from the deals. “But they … gave her a couple of dollars because that’s what she’d make off it,” daughter Ada Zoske recalled. “It was just how it worked.”

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Club happenings were usually safe news to report, and for B.K. they became a consistent source of longer articles when more substantial ideas ran dry. She included names, titles, refreshments and plans for the future as if she took the minutes. She also took pains to formulate catchy or interesting stories out of club news. In an example from a Lions Club meeting, she wrote:

Hamilton, July 1 – Two natives of Holland, Dr. Tom Smit of Amsterdam, and Cornelius Visser, local businessman, were reared in adjoining communities but had to come overseas to Hamilton to know each other, Mr. Visser said Tuesday when he introduced the Netherlands scientist at the Lions club luncheon.

Dr. Smit was program speaker for the Lions, giving a description of Holland, and its ever-present problem of land versus ocean. Reviewing some of the traditions of his country, Dr. Smit said, "I never heard the story of the Dutch boy saving the country by sticking his finger in a hole in the dike until I came to the United States." He is here to spend a few weeks studying yellow fever at the Rocky mountain laboratory.

B.K. had no reservations about including herself, third-person, when she wrote about a club in which she was involved. In the 1940s she held the office of secretary-treasurer twice for the Bitterroot Valley Pioneer Society (later the Fifty-Year Club). She was Bitter Root Valley Historical Society charter member and Toastmistriss' Club president in the 1950s, Woman’s Club president in the early 1960s, and winner of two awards from the women of the University of Montana School of Journalism during the 1950s and 1960s. B.K. was named Woman of the Year by the Montana Federation of Business and Professional Women in 1954.

In August of 1963, B.K. quit her office as president of the Ravalli County Woman’s Club, in part because she had recently suffered a fall. Visiting friends, she tripped down the back stairs of her host’s home. The Western News reported her fall with the light headline, "B.K. Suffered K.O. But Soon Will Be O.K.,” The article, no doubt headlined by Romney, reported B.K. unconscious and added
that she had “suffered severe lacerations (sic), bruises and shock after she fell down the stairs of the LeRoy Jones residence.” But she was recovering well after a stay in the hospital, Romney wrote. 70

The fall set B.K. back. She let go of her responsibilities to the Woman’s Club and her byline took a five-month break.

Upon her return, she kicked off what would become her habit of a fine holiday piece – for nearly every holiday to come until 1987. For her comeback, she described the first valley Christmas celebrations. She wrote:

Christmas in the Year of our Lord, Eighteen Hundred and Forty-one, was time of the first Christian celebration in all the area that is now the sovereign state of Montana. And the Bitter Root Valley, then the homeland of the Salish (Flathead) Indians, was the locale of Montana’s first Christmas church observance of Christ’s birthday. …

And so in this year of our Lord, Nineteen Hundred and Sixty Three, may we remember with humility the rich heritage the Indians helped to bring us; the role they played so earnestly in that first Christmas service, not only first in our valley, but first in all Montana.

St. Mary’s little chapel is now a shrine, not only revered by the Catholic people but by Protestants too, who humbly pay memory tribute to the beginning of Christianity in this great state, Montana. 71

A month after the Christmas article, B.K. produced a story about her need to quit her job as president of the Woman’s Club. She experienced no difficulty covering stories that involved herself. She wrote:

A special Woman’s Club business meeting called by the Executive Board was held Tuesday afternoon in the clubroom.

It was called because of the resignation of B.K. Monroe as president. Mrs. Monroe submitted her resignation because of recent illness. Her resignation was accepted and Mrs. Ruth Brandborg was named president to fill out the unexpired one-year term. 72

She wrote about the clubs with an assumption that her word was the right word. Some of her club stories might have been perceived as propaganda, especially when she belonged to the club and knew the inside scoop. She sometimes functioned as a flack for
certain organizations, with no noticeable objections from the readers. In a 60-inch story that ran on the front page of the Ravalli Republican in 1964, she wrote:

The Woman’s Club, then, has a right to be proud of the town’s splendid fountain of literature, for it is a lasting proof of pioneering effort on the part of its charter members. And the club is appreciative of contributed volumes, Mrs. G.M. Brandborg, president, said.

You name it, and find there was no movement for the good of the community and county and state that didn’t get an assist from the Hamilton Woman’s Club. The Club needs young members this 50th year, women who will relieve the veterans, some of them past the four-score years in age ...

Sitting behind a screen to cover a sportsmen’s banquet was a coup for a female reporter in B.K.’s early days. Covering candidates as they raced in sometimes bitter battles for local and state seats was equally extraordinary. B.K. carried herself with a pride that indicated she had an exceptional role, but did not wish to draw attention to her gender.

“Politics? B.K. has never been afraid of handling that …” wrote publisher John Barrows. “Years ago, at a political rally in the Masonic Temple’s dining hall, back in the days when women writers were more than an oddity, they were darn near non-existent, B.K. quietly sat in the corner. Her pencil copied the gist of the conversation and speeches. And not until it was all over did anyone even realize she was there.”

Politics energized B.K. for election season. She wrote about candidates with verve and especially Republicans. She did not hide her political preference.

“She was a Republican,” Jelinek said. “She made no bones about it. She was argumentative with certain people; any Democrat.”

She was Republican because her father was Republican, B.K. wrote, and when she voted Democrat it was to test her husband’s affiliation. Women in Idaho had the right to vote in 1911 when B.K. cast her Democratic vote. Roy, away on a ranger assignment,
managed to vote in Pierce City. B.K., living in a cabin but determined to do everything a woman could as a public servant, found a way.

"The neighbors looked after my daughter and took me to the polls," B.K. said. "I voted for Woodrow Wilson, because I thought it was ‘love me, love my politics,’ but I never voted Democratic again." 76

It is not clear whether B.K. voted Democrat because her husband required it or because she thought it proper, but siding with Republicans remained with her for life.

In 1954, B.K. witnessed President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s dedication of the new U.S. Forest Service smokejumper depot in Missoula. "The day was memorable for me, since I had press credentials that entitled me to a seat in the official press box," she recalled. 77

"There were, of course, newsmen from all over the United States - all friendly and glad to exchange talk with us Western Montana news people while we waited for the President's arrival."

B.K. was enamored with the visit, and felt Ike’s grin reach out to her. She recalled: "He was one of us and there was no ostentation – just the glad manner of a man from another state coming to visit his western neighbors. His dedication speech, as I remember, was a simple tribute to the forest workers, particularly the smokejumpers who risked their lives in the fire season to protect the lands we all own." 78

Former Ravalli County Sheriff Dale Dye recalled his work as a deputy in the early 1960s. He worked under Sheriff Jack Cain who was a tireless Democrat. Cain tolerated B.K.’s reporting until one story – on some political issue Dye can’t recall – sent Cain over the edge.
“He jumped all over her,” Dye said. “I mean, just up one side and down the other. All of the guys in the office – two deputies, undersheriff – we took exception all with the way Jack treated B.K.”

It didn’t stop B.K. Cain’s office still offered liberal access; deputies provided information and treated her with respect. B.K. kept writing as she pleased. It was more of a game than an intensive battle for B.K. She was friends with Democrats, such as Ed O’Hare, father of long-time Bitterroot journalist Pat Rhodes. O’Hare frequently visited with B.K. But her political preference made its way into her writing.

The battle of election nights in Ravalli County and the role of local newspapers struck B.K. as an important aspect of her job. Political affiliation wasn’t nearly as impressive to her as the debates, perennial unlucky candidates, and dirty campaigns that factored into news coverage. She wrote:

From the time I began covering county elections for the press in 1922, election years have been times of wonder as to how opposing party candidates lived through campaign smearing and how each tried or didn’t care to try and keep his side of the fight for office above reproach.

Battles literally raged in the legislative arena, but the county consistently sent good senators and representatives to the legislature.

District judge and clerk of court hardly changed until one retired, making easy races, B.K. recalled. B.K. herself once served a mildly contested term as public administrator. She won because the incumbent didn’t try hard to win, she wrote. However after two years B.K. said she “couldn’t see herself taking care of estates and haggling with would-be heirs as a life work.”

Races for county commissioner and sheriff were hotly contested, while the race for judge was calm. Judges stayed in their seats until retirement, she wrote.
In the early 1940s, young attorneys Gardner Brownlee and Tom Koch put out their shingle in Hamilton. B.K. supported the law firm with a preference in her stories, according to Koch. In doing so she helped Brownlee, a Republican, beat Lee Metcalf by 17 votes in the race for county attorney, Koch said.  

“She gave us the breaks right from the start,” Koch said.  

Her reporting seemed to support the state in most criminal matters, he recalled, and that suited the law firm’s members who found her a likeable person as well. If she cared about an event or side, she pushed the agenda into the newspaper. Her early lessons from Conkey at the Ravalli Republican about leaving her viewpoint out of news stories didn’t maintain.  

“She was always on the side of the law,” Koch said. “She was always on our side in newspaper stories and it drove the defense lawyers just nuts. … (the) chief defense lawyer used to get so goddamned mad at B.K., he could hardly stand it.”  

The traditional election night took place at the Romneys’ Western News office. At most there were 15 precincts in Ravalli County. Tally counts came by phone or runners. All newspapers helped pay for the long-distance telephone calls, and circuits hummed, according to B.K., who filed stories and counts for papers across the state. Calls always cost except between Hamilton and Grantsdale or Corvallis. “Long Distance got workouts for all the other valley towns,” B.K. wrote. She recalled:  

Gathering election returns was never shirked, for that was really the people’s news. “Long distance please,” calling Missoula or the AP at Helena at given times until long after midnight in company with other Hamilton news men. I loved election night.  

Toll phone calls were up B.K.’s alley. But the mob mentality on election nights when the general public swamped the Western News office got out-of-hand, and she did not
happily tolerate the scene of hangers-on. Her job was more important than the tension and gloating wrapped up in election night, the behavior that interrupted the journalists.

She wrote:

I never quite got used to the public’s take-over ways on the crucial election night. The idle literally mobbed that small front office. No mercy and almost no manners, cigar and cigarette smoke and whisky-breath combined to nag the working news people almost to distraction, but Miles Romney II will go down in my memory as the most patient news man I ever knew.  

As women became involved in politics, their behavior annoyed B.K. more than the conduct of men. One year, to free up room for Romney, she borrowed a phone and desk in the Cook law office adjacent to the Western News. But several local women, recently participating in politics, followed B.K. into the private quarters and attached to her drama. B.K. wrote:

So what? One woman sat on the desk at my left, another hung over the right and the telephone was ever in action, so that calls coming in were hindered. For the half-dozen and more women, it was a party and when the final counting for their pet made him a winner, more party goods came along, brown bag wise. But somehow I stuck to keeping dry, and about 3 o’clock in the morning, wound up my part in giving Ravalli County election returns to the newspapers in my territory .

On the other hand, the opening scene of women in politics was a source of pride for B.K. as far as the women elected into the office. She wrote that Ravalli County elected a woman to the state Legislature, Maggie Smith Hathaway, and in 1916 helped elect Jeanette Rankin – once a valley resident – as the first woman in U.S. Congress. Later in life, B.K. grew friendly with Rankin and rode horses with her at her ranch in the Charlos Heights area. She put aside her rigid opinions of women when she saw a woman gain a certain level of expertise or prove herself.

Ravalli County elected the first woman sheriff in Montana in 1932. Berna Marks Corley had taken over after her husband, then-sheriff R.M. Corley, died of heart trouble.
in 1930. She proceeded to win the regular election and serve another term, which is somewhat surprising as the battle for sheriff typically delivered the most bitterly contested race in the county during the 20th century, according to B.K.  

In a column on the history of politics in Ravalli County, B.K. concluded:

There is not enough column space to relate all the election thrills that came along those active reporting years of mine and there will be phone calls — "You forgot so-and-so in that write-up about elections," but a reporter always takes that chance.

As a daily journalist, B.K. would begin to focus on the history of the Bitterroot Valley, using the grist of the first half of her career to fuel the last.

8 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Interview with Michael Zoske, Kerlee family reunion, July 29, 2000.
14 Ibid.
15 Interview with Helen Bibler, Spice of Life restaurant, February 16, 2001.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
24 B.K. Monroe, story, “1941-era Bitterooters Didn’t Have to Worry About the Fate of the Stock Farm,” Ravalli Republican, March 31, 1978, p. 46-A, special section.
26 Ibid.
27 Burgdorfer interview, April 8, 2001.
Jelinek interview.  
32 Interview with Joe Zoske, Kerlee family reunion, July 2000.  
33 Interview with Michael Zoske, Kerlee family reunion, July 29, 2000.  
34 King interview.  
35 Ibid.  
36 King interview; Evelyn King estimated the pay per inch during the 1940s and 1950s. The Missoulian and the Spokesman Review don’t maintain wage or personnel records back that far.  
37 “News of the Treasure State,” The Daily Missoulian, Friday morning, January 13, 1922, p. 3.  
38 The Sunday Missoulian, November 13, 1932.  
40 The Daily Missoulian, May 1, 1959, p. 11.  
41 Interview with Dale Dye at his Hamilton home, March 24, 2001.  
42 Ibid.  
44 Ibid.  
45 Ibid.  
46 Ibid.  
49 Interview with Gil Jelinek at his home, Friday, March 16, 2001.  
50 Ibid.  
54 Gilluly interview.  
55 Gilluly interview.  
56 Ibid.  
60 Zoske interview, April 11, 2001.  

Jelinek interview.

Interview with B.K. Monroe by Paul Kerlee, August, 1986.


Ibid.

Dye interview.

Rhodes interview.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Telephone interview with Tom Koch, March 2000.

Telephone interview with Tom Koch, March 2000.

Koch interview.


Ibid.

Ibid.
Chapter Seven: A Time for Transition

In spring of 1965, an old building torn down on South Fifth Street in Hamilton left behind a faded book, “Resources and Descriptions of Ravalli County,” which dropped out of a cache. The manual was published in 1899 without an author, but the man who demolished the building knew exactly what to do with it – give it to B.K. Monroe. And B.K. knew exactly what to do with it – write herself a column. After all, “Illustrations brought back several interesting bits of Bitter Root lore,” she wrote.²

Paging through the book, B.K. first saw a recognizable logging scene – the same image which had hung on the wall of her Darby home as a child. In the foreground her father stood at the end of a deck of logs with her brother, Will, behind him.³

The book contained a picture of Tammany Castle, the barn built for Marcus Daly’s race horses, and a picture of Daly’s original mansion and his Ravalli Hotel in Hamilton. A valley map depicting Stevensville as the county seat was included with “Hamilton is now the county seat” stamped across it. And a picture of Salish people treated with medical care at the St. Mary’s Mission accompanied a story on the Jesuits, Father DeSmet and Father Ravalli, who began white man’s work in the Bitterroot in the mid-19th century. If B.K. would have finished her dream of completing a manuscript about the history of the Bitterroot Valley, she would have focused on the same topics: logging, Daly and the American Indians. She was passionate about each of the themes also present in the unearthed book of unknown origin.

²

³
Though she never published an official manuscript, several of her unpublished materials are collected at the Ravalli County Museum and others are in the care of her daughter, Ada Zoske, who said some of her mother’s historical writing never surfaced in the days after her mother’s death.  

In 1963, B.K. published a momentous piece in the Ravalli Republican. It was her first comeback to the paper in two decades. After 22 years, publisher Jack E. Coulter had retired. Circulation had tripled during his tenure, he said in his final editorial, and the paper was now a five-day daily. A new publisher, George Danker, and a new editor, Duane E. Flaa, quickly brought B.K. back to the paper.

Thirteen days after Coulter left, B.K.’s byline returned to the front page of the Ravalli Republican, and included this honorary tribute to her:

For more than 40 years the name B.K. Monroe has been synonymous with news in the Bitter Root Valley. She has written the big stories and the little ones, recorded in a day-by-day history the births, weddings, deaths and doings of the people she loves.

During the same four decades, she has had another love affair with the colorful history, tradition and heritage of the valley where Montana had its beginning. At reporting this history, she has no peer.

It’s been a long time since the veteran newspaperwoman had a by-line in the Ravalli Republican but today there it is, big and black on page 1, over a story about Ravalli County’s upcoming anniversary. Welcome back, B.K.

She made her grand entrance with her first historical column for the Ravalli Republican – a report on Ravalli County’s history. Such columns appeared on the cover of the paper for about 10 years, before they slowly moved to the inside of the paper. Her work had changed gears from daily news hits to long historical pieces. She wrote:

February has several notable dates that history has put down for Americans to venerate, such as Lincoln’s birthday and Washington’s, February 12 and 22 respectively, but for the people of the Bitter Root Valley there comes February 16 as anniversary of the date when Ravalli County was born, when boundary lines that tallied in most respects with those of the valley itself, were etched on the Montana map.
Yes, it was February 16, 1893, that Ravalli County was born, and Saturday this little southwestern Montana municipality will be 70 years of age. This is a little summary of how come.

Missoula county was a spreading hunk of valleys and mountains that practically encompassed all of the northwest corner of Montana, including the Flathead valley and the Bitter Root. The Legislature, taking into consideration the many, many miles that all these far-flung communities had to travel to come to the county seat, Missoula, to transact legal business and attend to court matters, granted the petitions of people and enacted creative laws.

Flathead retained the valley name from the new county, but the Bitter Root folks, aided by sympathetic minds in the Legislature, decided their county’s name should be commemorative and mindful of the great work done in the valley by the Jesuit Father Antony Ravalli, decided to give the new county his name … 7

Six months and four stories later, B.K.’s old friend Gilluly returned to edit the paper after a five-year absence. He, too, invited B.K. to continue submitting historical stories and cover other news items, such as club news. For B.K., it was a source of pride that fit right into her passionate devotion to her community.

“Bessie was willing to write historical stories – more often than not she threw them at us. I didn’t try to tell her what to do,” he said. 8

Readers knew of the valley’s long-time journalist who had become quite active in the local movement to record the history of the valley.

B.K. was a founding member and first vice-president of the Bitter Root Historical Society, officer of the Bitterroot Valley Pioneer Society (later the Fifty-Year Club), and called on for dozens of speaking engagements, from holidays to club meetings, museum functions and schools. When the Pioneer Club started in 1940, it was just a group of early settlers having a Sunday potluck together. Eventually, it was the Bitter Root Fifty-Year Club, meeting in towns across the valley.
In the early 1950s, B.K. helped set up a little museum at the Chamber of Commerce office in Hamilton. One afternoon, on the sidewalk in front of the federal building, B.K. and her two companions made a pact. She wrote:

Virginia and I, by a two-voice vote, made Phyllis the president; next, Phyllis and I by the same process of election placed Virginia in office as secretary; the two of them sneaked up on me and – I was tagged vice president. Glenn Chaffin lined up officially as treasurer when we got the museum off and running. 9

The Hamilton museum ran into some trouble along the way. First located in the Chamber of Commerce, it lost its home when that building was demolished. Members of the historical society and contributors took relics into their homes; businesses stored a few; and others were taken by families who had left. 10

Soon, as an offshoot, the Bitter Root Valley Historical Society came to be to protect the artifacts and stories of the county’s history. B.K. wrote:

Hearts of many valley pioneers opened up like crammed hope chests and before many months had gone the way of time, Darby and Hamilton each had a Museum in town. 11

But when the Ravalli County Courthouse of 1902 was replaced with a new structure, historical society members with the help of B.K. convinced commissioners to allow the museum to make the former building its headquarters. She wrote:

And now both Hamilton and Darby have bonafide historical homes for their museums. Museum service in this Bitter Root Valley can not be over-played. This valley was first white settlement for then nameless Montana, and had all “the first things” like church, school, farming, irrigation, stock-raising, manufacturing (flour and lumber mills), hospital and pharmacy and incidental industries.

Beginning at the South of the valley with the Ross Hole and Sula pioneer ranch country, down the East Fork, and the Alta point of the West Fork, every trail along these two rivers that meet to form the Bitter Root has a history of more than a century. And from Darby north, Grantsdale, Hamilton, Corvallis and Woodside, Victor, Stevensville, Florence and the last town on the Bitter Root line, Lolo, all are linked in history making of the early 19th Century.
So be it. Ravalli County wears the crown, proud to be home of history dating at least to 1805 for the white man. And for uncounted centuries as the heritage and homeland of the Indians.  

B.K.’s involvement in history extended beyond her effort to save community records. Her take on the people and events of the Bitterroot Valley developed as the valley’s population changed, grew and improved technologically. She was probably one of the few “oldtimers” in the valley to embrace change and value the past.

Writing history, an effort that began in the 1960s and ended with her death in 1987, developed as she aged, a slow process that B.K. wouldn’t let stand in her way of producing copy and maintaining her relationships with sources and newspapers. Her effort and productivity in tracing local history cannot be exaggerated.

“She definitely was a historian,” said grand-niece Helen Bibler. “She had such an inquiring mind. Such an inquiring mind. And she had such a way of dragging stories out of people.”

B.K. sought respect as a historian. She worked to get facts right and defend her position; she unceasingly wrote about the Jesuit missionaries and the Daly family. She once wrote:

Call me a memory tramp who hopes that some day she may latch on the rating of historian. Throughout my years in Montana, my native state, I have loved to listen to the oldtimers, to glean from their memories facts about the state’s beginning.

While the bulk of her historical work centered on her favorite themes, in her 70 years of reporting and personal writing she also delineated several family histories, her own genealogy, and the history of valley post offices and school districts. The topics also included Bitterroot Public Library; Darby and its early structures; Grantsdale; Corvallis trees; Bitterroot horses; valley forts and war monuments; hotels; fires; the Big Hole;
Rombo Flats; local hot springs; creameries and farms; the first flour mills; early pharmacies and prescription drugs; homesteaders who resisted taxes; sawmills and their development; and quilters and quilting. She also provided basic day-to-day news – including the rise and fall of public figures; births, marriages, moves, travels and deaths of valley residents; and visitors and writers of the valley and state. Compiled, her work built the bones of 100 or more years of Bitterroot Valley history.

From 1967 to 1987, B.K. published her most personal and historical work in newspapers. During those 20 years, she devoted at least 60 of her columns and stories and a handful of letters to the editor to childhood pioneer days in Darby and her early womanhood as a forest ranger’s wife. Most columns included information about her homestead childhood; a few described life as a forest ranger’s wife.

As she aged, her reports of historical substance outside her family narrowed to a few themes – Lewis and Clark, the exile of the Salish from the Bitterroot, the Jesuit missionaries, Marcus Daly and the town of Hamilton, and the first forest rangers under the newborn U.S. Forest Service.

As a rough example, in a five-year period from 1972 to 1976, at least 85 of B.K.’s columns in the Ravalli Republic related some aspect of Bitterroot Valley history. During that period, she averaged about 39 columns a year for the Republic, leaving about half her work devoted to history in the valley.

“She was the town’s conscience,” said granddaughter Robin Lee. “It was like she was replaying tapes – ones of historical significance.”

B.K. kept this pace of almost 20 history columns a year from the time of her stroke in 1968 until her death in 1987. And in the last year of her life, her productivity increased.
B.K. was engaged in history. Knowledge of history was the key to fine journalism, she believed. “Write it like it is – that’s what I always did, and now that I’m older, I write it like it was,” she said.

The Lewis and Clark Exploration drew dozens of B.K. stories. In 1804, young Meriwether Lewis and William Clark left St. Louis to explore the Louisiana Purchase formerly owned by the French. And thank goodness they found Montana, B.K. believed. She wrote:

And here let us give pause and think. Had it not been for this lost trail a Canadian flag might have been floating over our town today instead of our glorious Red, White and Blue. Surely the Lewis and Clark trail was not all “lost.”

They crossed from the Dakotas to what has come to be known as Three Forks – the intersection of the expedition-named Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin rivers – and descended into the Lemhi country of Idaho. When they came upon a camp of Indians, they were greeted with warmth; a council was gathered, white robes were put on the shoulders of the white men and a peace pipe was shared. B.K. wrote:

The lodges of the Salish with wreaths of smoke around, must have been suddenly homey to the wandering explorers, and to their Bird Woman, Sacajawea, the Shoshonee, they spelled a second chapter in joyous communion with people of her race. For it was in the Lemhi camp of Lewis and Clark that Sacajawea met her long-lost brother, Chief Cameahwait of the Shoshones, and others of her childhood associations. …

There with signs and gestures to aid the advances of the white explorers, her language, noble in it simplicity, Sacajawea told their story. …

B.K. considered Christopher Columbus the “blessed discoverer of America,” and felt that local history confirmed her idea that white settlement was good for the Salish and the Bitterroot Valley. She told how she discovered her first historical resources:

It was delving into our Carnegie-founded public library that gave me an education into Montana’s first chapter of State history.
Glory be! It all started right in the Jesuit-founded St. Mary’s Mission in what is now our own Ravalli County.  

She held a belief that Christianity was morally right. The American Indian, B.K. wrote, was a child of nature. Until the white man arrived the American Indian knew “only natural ways.” Salish believed in myth not religion, B.K. believed, and she called a religion that resided only in “the treetops.”

Their mythology made the missionaries’ lessons of Christian heritage easier to digest, she believed, and thus made the valley a better place to live. In 1970 she wrote: 

The Jesuits brought practical teaching as to sustenance for the body, in the same understandable (sic) way they taught the Easter story.

Seed planted was reborn when the earth was warmed with sunshine and rain. Body and soul must be kept together, and since the Indian knew only the law of nature and her offerings in the way of food, he learned a new concept.

Helping by copying nature’s plan; seed in the earth to bring about a sustenance that was one to be accounted for; planting and reaping; faithful tending of the earth.

Well, all that new concept of sustenance, came about only 130 years ago in the Bitter Root Valley. ... Oh yes! It is a lovely valley of homes now. So let us Thank God and his Salish-Kootenai Indians for their help and sacrifice.

Throughout her life, however, B.K.’s take on white settlers and the exile of the Salish swayed from apologetic to defensive.

Dale Burk, former Missoulian editor and a Stevensville book publisher, referred to B.K. as having a “flair for a time.” She failed to filter her strong opinions from her reporting, he said, and not just in the columns, but it reflected the kind of reporting she grew up on.

“The kind of journalism she did couldn’t be done today,” Burk said. He points to both columns and historical articles on the Salish, the peaceful Bitterroot Valley’s tribe of American Indians who were removed at the end of the 19th century and sent to the Flathead reservation, and he suggests that B.K., perhaps because of her time, held a bias.
Burk’s concern probably wouldn’t surprise Monroe, who quit working as the Bitterroot Valley’s correspondent for the Missoulian about the time he began editing in the late 1960s. B.K.’s insight into her long-held views on the Salish leaned toward a new perspective; one that offered gentle but certain reproach for the United States government.

“Of course, she knew history about the Bitterroot more than anybody in the world,” said Tom Koch, 93, professional acquaintance of B.K. and still a practicing attorney. “(But) I’m somewhat of a history buff myself, so some of the times I knew that what she was setting forth was not quite accurate.”

“She probably thought it was true,” Koch said. “She wrote things her way – the way she wanted to see them. She was just a little imaginative, I think.”

Her imagination was most evident in her columns where she created quotes or set the scene with her personal views on historical characters.

In 1981, B.K. wrote a column on the history of Montana, but from the perspective of the state – as though she were having an imaginary chat with Montana. For one, the state said she was content since the white settlers had named her; for another, the state said she honored the sacrifice of the Indian tribes, who made room for growth and development within her borders. The column continued:

I am a proud state with great respect for all the combination of Indian spirit and sacrifice of Indian birthright that broadened settlement and concord for my pioneers. Their descendants have the advantages of a great heritage and Indian sharing. I am everlastingly grateful to the Indians of all Montana, and first of all to our Salish and Kootenai nations who relinquished all title and moved out of their birthright valley, finally in 1891.
In the end, the state pointed out that the Bitterroot Valley was her birthplace. B.K. reminded the state that she, too, had been born in the Bitterroot Valley. And she finished her column: “P.S. (I reminded Montana that I too was born in the Bitter Root Valley a year before she acquired statehood.)” 29

However B.K. served up history, the community generally accepted her take on events. There is not ready evidence in the letters to the editor, for example, that people challenged her accounts. And her efforts to connect with Salish people came to light in her shifting perspectives, as well as in several friendships she made with members of the tribe.

Editor Bob Gilluly, who handled her copy for about 13 years, said readers respected B.K. as a historian because she had been around longer than most. “Secondly, she had a way of telling it; a little wordy, embellishing, that didn’t bother anybody from Darby to Hamilton because she spent most of her life in those towns and anything she wrote was OK with the oldtimers,” he added. 30 B.K. would slip in an occasional folksy editorial comment, Gilluly said.

“She could relate to local people,” he said. “Even if it was mildly inaccurate, people forgave Bess because she was one of them – especially in Darby; if you hadn’t been around for 50 years in those days you were considered a carpet bagger.”

The Marcus Daly family’s influence often became B.K.’s topic of choice. She propped up the family history and outlined their lives in countless columns during the 1960s through 1980s. With her relationship to Margit Besseneyey, who introduced organized trail rides to the valley, B.K. also grew to adore Daly’s racing history. Daly
had made the Bitterroot Valley his proving ground for horse racing, his passion. B.K. researched the original Daly racehorses and how they fared. She wrote:

(Daly) built a covered race track whereon his great horses might run in training for national events of the turf in eastern states.
Greatest of Daly race stars was Tammany. In 1892 Tammany won the Lawrence Realization and the Withers Stake at Belmont Park, New York.
Then in September of 1893, Tammany beat Lamplighter, greatest horse in the east, in a special match race at Guttenberg, New Jersey.
It is said that 15,000 racing fans jammed the Guttenberg track on September 28, 1893 for that memorable race. Tammany "won" one of the greatest match races in history of the American turf. 31

Daly’s Tammany was beloved, and he paid an artist $3,000 to design a hardwood mosaic of Tammany’s head to set in the floor of Daly’s Montana Hotel bar in Anaconda that was not to be treaded upon. 32

The politics Daly conducted in Montana during the 1890s were not free of corruption – though he was not alone in this – and the famed Daly-Clark battles over mines and politics grew out of the payoffs and misdeeds. But B.K. forgave and forgot, and in a tone harking back to her own take on reporting for the party she admired, B.K. wrote: “He (Daly) just wanted the right people to win the elections.” 33

Daly also wielded power to move the county seat from Stevensville to Hamilton. She credited his influence when “an election by the people took the county seat away from Stevensville, moving it lock, stock and barrel to his town Hamilton.” 34

While the first board of commissioners in Ravalli County met on April 7, 1893, driving buggies to their Stevensville town hall meeting, a mere five years later Hamilton became Marcus Daly’s progressive town. So in 1898 the county courthouse put down roots at the same Hamilton location on which it stands today. 35 B.K. commented:
There is a lot of romance in county-building, a lot of human interest and an amazing loyalty still lives in the hearts of the men and women of today who are the descendents of those 1893 county fathers.

They are keeping the faith, they respect the hard-headed folks who worked to create Ravalli County in the first place. 35

Newspaper audiences in the Bitterroot valued her writing with a sense of history, according to Gilluly. “Bessie would make great reading for newcomers in the valley ... to those searching their roots,” he said.

Daly’s mill in Hamilton died in 1915. Fifty years later, she still viewed his passing with nostalgia. She wrote:

When oldtimers come back to the Bitter Root and go looking for landmarks of half-a-century ago or more, one of the first things they seem to grasp is the absence of “The Big Mill” that one-time, principal industry of Hamilton that drew on forests of the valley for its lumber supply. ...

Many of Hamilton’s earliest residents came to work in some capacity at the mill Marcus Daly founded after he had bought up two or three smaller sawmill outfits operated by pioneering timber men.

Daly did away with the somewhat primitive mills and his spread of sawing apparatus and a big mill pond took up a lot of space on the east bank of the Bitter Root River. The main channel of the river was harnessed by a big dam and I still remember how a girlfriend and I made the journeyed across the river on the narrow cat walk to visit a West Side friend. (Yes we got dizzy.)

After Marcus Daly’s death in late 1900, the mill continued operation until about 1915’s autumn. ...

The big mill and the Daly Mansion, Riverside, were Marcus Daly’s prime reason for founding Hamilton. He wanted a town to serve his workers as well as his young family, for there were then three daughters and a son, who with Mrs. Daly spent much of the year at the estate. ...

Her historical research and writing often reflected the perspectives and memories of the “oldtimers” and the spirit of the early settlers who took great pride in the Bitterroot.

“She had a big following,” Barrows said. “People gave her a berth because she was pioneer stock – tradition – and because we liked her. ... She was always real polite but she always had an opinion.”
Most people in the valley, up until the growth spurt of the 1970s, lived in the Bitterroot because their parents had picked the scenic, small-town valley community; many were proud children and grandchildren of pioneers.

"The Bitterroot at that time was a valley without any money, yet they loved the little place that hadn’t been found," Wayne Hedman said. "(B.K.) shared that love with all the other people in the valley. It was a common denominator .... And if you were born here and you were born on Tin Cup Creek, well, that cemented this love affair that she had with the Bitterroot Valley." 37

B.K. Monroe was the prime cheerleader of the passionate devotion to valley history, Hedman said. "Her story theme was recognizable," he recalled, including her penchant for "Bitter Root" spelled with two words.

The Forest Service adopted Bitterroot as one word, B.K. believed, only because they made a silly habit of combining words – Deerlodge and Nezperce as examples. 38

She held up the state Legislature as an example. When they voted for Montana’s flower to be the bitterroot, state law incorporated the two words. When looking at a new map to determine the heights of local mountain peaks, B.K. was startled by the one-word use. She wrote: "The only thing to hurt my eyes now as always was the single wording of ‘BITTERROOT’ crowding three sets of double letters." 39

In 1979, fed up that the one-word Bitterroot began to stick, B.K. devoted a column to the topic. She wrote: "That should be put out of commission for all time the ... ungrammatical ‘Bitterroot.’ (Attention U.S. Forest Service)." 40
Until her stroke, B.K. completed news stories for the AP and the Missoulian, and filed occasional club and local human interest stories for the Ravalli Republican, along with her growing number of historical pieces.

Former Sheriff Dye, who began as a deputy in 1960 and became sheriff in 1967, recalled B.K. arriving at the courthouse once a day to collect the daily news. She hobbled into the sheriff’s office in an old-fashioned long dress-coat and a corset, Dye said. She wore a classic 2-inch-high pair of black high heels, though by this time they hurt her feet. “She had bad ankles,” Dye recalled. “We talked about that once while she hobbled around in those bad shoes with bad ankles. She always looked like she was in pain.”

No makeup or lipstick; a broach at her neck, a hat on her head; even on hottest day her blouse was buttoned up to her neck, Dye recalled. If B.K. didn’t show up, deputies worried unless she called in for her information.

In the case of a serious crime, they tried to pick up B.K. along the way. “I touted really good relations with the press,” Dye said. “Because if the people didn’t know what the problems were, they couldn’t help you and it was the people that helped in solving crimes.”

But to pick up a reporter at home?

“I felt kind of sorry for B.K. because she had a tough row to hoe – not paid, crippled in the foot,” he said. “We invited her to go, but I don’t think she ever imposed herself on us.”
Dye recalled a helicopter crash at Lake Como that killed two people. The Federal Aviation Administration guard tried to stop the sheriff from taking B.K. to the scene of the accident. "I said, 'By God, I can get you in,'" Dye recalled. He did.

In 1968, at 80 years old, B.K. was essentially dismissed from the Missoulian. The reasons were multiple. Her workload at the Missoulian – and her ability to move around – had diminished; and her historical writing for the Ravalli Republican grew. Indeed, it became more difficult for B.K. to find rides or chase news, ship off copy on deadline and get up to do it again the next day in a rapidly changing community.

In 1968, Dale Burk arrived at the Missoulian as state editor. One of his first assignments, handed down by managing editor Ed Coyle, was to eliminate the 12 regional correspondents who had, somewhere along the way, deteriorated to note-takers of the "old-line stuff," such as club news, society notes, etc. B.K. had fallen into that trap. "She made it her business to be aware of at least what was going on in the prevailing social elite in the Bitterroot Valley, of which she was one," Burk said. Coyle had told Burk, "Go tell (B.K.) we're making this change." And so he did.

"I was the blunt instrument to change all that," Burk said. "Because the times had changed." Coyle wanted to headline the Missoulian with solid news, hard-hitting and investigative projects, but he decided the correspondents were past their prime or unqualified to shoulder the change. Burk called B.K., set up an appointment, and drove down the valley to tell her. "She couldn't get out and cover those things," Burk recalled. "I don't think she should have tried to make the change. Times had changed – a faster, growing, dynamic culture."
The days of society-page news were all but gone, Burk said. Though B.K., 80, covered all sorts of news for the Missoulian in her 46 years as their correspondent, she of late had been focused on local notes and club news that she collected by calling friends.

Out of deference, Burk did not entirely let B.K. go, though he did the other correspondents. An occasional feature would be welcomed, he told her.

Soon after the news, B.K. suffered the stroke. She woke up in the hospital with her left side paralyzed. It took an autumn season to recover, but when she healed, she returned to her apartment on Third Street. A short three years on her own preceded a move into the nursing home, where she continued to write for the Ravalli Republic.

3 Ibid.
4 Zoske interview, April 18, 2001.
7 Ibid.
8 Gilluly interview.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Bibler interview.
17 Sarah Prodell, “B.K. Monroe dies at 98,” Missoulian, date?
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.

Koch interview.


Ibid.

Gilluly interview.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Hedman interview.


Berk interview, April 24, 2001.


Ibid.

There were very few people who had homes. The only variation with whom was Margi Schwartz, who lived across the street. “Why would Margi Schwartz have befriended B.K., so much? The one thing was that B.K. never lost the fact that she was a human. She was never one to ask for help.”

In contrast to her younger years, B.K. had learned to ask for help. Hedman didn’t meet her until 1969, after her stroke, and he immediately noticed that she did what she had to, to get what she wanted.

In 1969, a year after B.K.’s stroke, the Hedmans had moved to Hamilton to purchase Bitter Root Drug from a man not on familiar terms with B.K. Hedman stumbled upon a
Presently, at 97 years of age,
I am still workin' for my livin' as a newspaper woman.
There is nothing easy about the news gathering way of life.

Chapter Eight: The Nursing Home Office

In 1971, B.K. could no longer live alone in her apartment.

After three years of caring for herself following her stroke, B.K. moved into the Valley View Estates nursing home on Eighth Street in Hamilton. It was also where her favorite celebration, the Fair Parade kicked off each year. It was a necessary move, according to family members, but one that B.K. did not appreciate.

For one, residents shared rooms. It would have been impossible to afford a single.

But soon, Countess Margit Sigray Besseneyey, granddaughter of Marcus Daly, was paying for the elderly journalist to have her own room. Margit also paid for B.K.'s phone calls, according to a granddaughter. She frequently visited B.K. at Valley View Estates, and B.K. continued to be unfailling in her devotion to the Dalys in her historical writing for the now-Ravalli Republic.

"There were very few people who had money. The only person with money was Margit Besseneyey," said Wayne Hedman, who helped restore the Daly Mansion. "Why would Margit Besseneyey have befriended B.K. so much? The one thing was that B.K. never hid the fact that she was destitute. She was never too bashful to ask for help."

In contrast to her younger years, B.K. had learned to ask for help. Hedman didn't meet her until 1969, after her stroke, and he immediately noticed that she did what she had to, to get what she wanted.

In 1969, a year after B.K.'s stroke, the Hedmans had moved to Hamilton to purchase Bitter Root Drug from a man not on friendly terms with B.K. Hedman stumbled upon a
letter of complaint written by a woman named Bessie Kerlee Monroe and mailed to the
drugstore earlier that year. "She was writing to complain about the price of her dizzy
pills," Hedman recalled. Dizzy pills were a prescription to lessen the effects of the
stroke. So Hedman walked the two blocks to her apartment to do some public relations.
"I remember her standing in the door," he recalled. "And my first memory of her was to
finesse this deal."

The two hit it off, and after B.K. moved into the nursing home, the Hedmans did
numerous favors for her. They delivered her copy to the newspaper, brought her boxes of
Kleenexes (stroke patients need a constant supply, Hedman said) and delivered other
small items she requested from Bitter Root Drug. "I don't know who paid her bills, but
B.K.'s bills were paid," Hedman said. B.K. was on Medicaid in the nursing home, and
Helen Hedman recalled people giving her clothing. Somehow, little perks were
accounted for.

"We did things for B.K. we didn't do for other customers," Helen Hedman recalled of
the woman who had left her toddlers with Helen's grandparents in 1913. "She was part
of our extended family. She adopted us, too. We were adopted because we were Roy
Lewis's kids."

B.K.'s room at Valley View Estates was small. Her desk and typewriter near the
window were steady companions. Her window presented a nice view of Blodgett
Canyon to mark the passage of the seasons in her columns.

She had a radio and a small television. One plant - a philodendron - sat in a pot, a
southeast Asian vase provided decoration, and photographs, some of a Biblical nature,
hung on the walls. Her books included the Bible and a prayer manual, Bitterroot and
Montana history books and copies of Frank Lloyd Wright materials and biographies. Her bed was covered in a floral quilt with a large orange and yellow afghan.

B.K.’s passion for history sustained her creativity and copy production during the last two decades of her life living in Valley View Estates nursing home. But the people—friends, family and colleagues—kept her going. She wrote, created and discussed journalism, the news business and the voices and history of the valley as if it were survival. She fueled her work with the ongoing news of people.

The Ravalli Republic ran her columns, updates and historical pieces until the day she died, but other newspaper work waned after her stroke. B.K. used letter writing to make new acquaintances and show off her concerns in newspapers. And she corresponded with four generations of family who lived from Alaska to Ohio.

Physically, B.K. shrunk, but remained up and ready for healthy debate. “She was a little tiny lady with a big fluff of white hair and great big glasses and she was always real polite, but she always had an opinion,” former Ravalli Republic ad manager then publisher John Barrows recalled.

Partially paralyzed, B.K. had lost her ability to type with both hands; her left hand permanently out of service. Barrows sometimes picked up her copy at the nursing home in the early 1970s. When he walked into her room, he found a focused woman hovering over a tiny gray-blue typewriter. Barrows recalled:

It was the most painful thing to watch. She’d type with one hand—clack-clack-clack—and then she’d pick up the left hand and put it on the shift key—clack—and then she’d put her left hand back in her lap. Clack-clack-clack...

As the valley grew with a population lift in the 1970s, and as perspectives on journalism hardened and the culture changed, B.K. kept typing away and readers enjoyed
her homespun flair. Colleagues, friends and family of B.K. treasure memories of visiting B.K., who carried on lively and informative conversations with an occasional hint of humor, though for the most part she behaved quite seriously.

“She was enormously enjoyable to visit with and had such a long memory of valley and personal history; I always hated to leave,” Pat Rhodes recalled. 4

B.K.’s granddaughter, Robin Lee, spent the summer in Hamilton when she was 12 years old, visiting her grandmother much of the time. B.K. took the opportunity to pass down knowledge about being a woman in the working world.

“She talked about sharing with me as a professional woman – that sense of purpose – things of interest,” Lee said. “That strength, that ability to express herself and loving it. She absorbed everything with a determination; a singleness of purpose.”

Her appealing confidence took on a stubborn quality, according to her children and grandchildren. And behind the cotton floral housedresses, glasses and short curly gray hair, her intensity grew.

“She had a way of looking at you,” Helen Hedman said. “I remember when I first met her I probably was a little frightened by her. She had a piercing way .... Almost a hawk-like way.”

In 1976, Tony Hadley, 22, was a new Ravalli Republic editor who moved to the valley straight out of journalism school. B.K. took him under her wing.

“Tony,” B.K. told him, “I want you to know nobody reads the Ravalli Republic for the news. They read it to see if you got it right.” 5

Hadley recalled, “She was always reminding me that there was a network out there in the know.”
During her first years in the nursing home, a nurse dropped off B.K.'s copy at the Ravalli Republic office early on the morning of its deadline. In the drop-box rested a sheet of a neatly typed carbon paper. Newsroom staff worked above the main Ravalli Republic office, the same room to which B.K. had escaped in the early 1920s when an adjacent downstairs music store had driven her to distraction.

If the nurse missed a delivery, or if B.K. had something she wanted to file on deadline, newsroom staff were called on for a pick-up. Reporters, the publisher, the editor of the Ravalli Republic took turns walking down the long flight of stairs, heading six blocks west to the nursing home, spending a few moments visiting with B.K. as she finished up, and returning with her copy to edit.

“We all had our little shift of doing B.K. stories,” former reporter Pat Zeiler said. “Just because you had sports, didn’t mean you didn’t have to do B.K. sometimes.”

Bob Gilluly, who was editor during the first section of B.K.'s 17 years at the nursing home, recalled being particularly responsible for B.K. during that period.

“I’d trudge over to Valley View every Wednesday or Thursday and pick it (the copy) up from her,” he said. “Bessie was understanding. She knew I was busy – five minutes and say, ‘Got to go.’”

B.K. earned about 10 cents an inch, Gilluly recalled. An historical piece of considerable length brought $7 or $8.

John Barrows published the Republic from 1977 to 1984 and stopped paying B.K. when she complained that any income limited her Medicaid and Medicare payments.

“Anytime we paid her for writing, the government took the money,” Barrows said. “I talked to (Montana Sen. Max) Baucus and tried to get it fixed.”
But it was to no avail, and so the paper began to pay for B.K. to eat her favorite dinner at Harry Hun’s Montana Cafe every couple of weeks. Barrows said he also left her a bit toothbrush money every few weeks.

“We paid her under the table,” he said. “We’d leave a $20 here and there because at the end there it was real restrictive. She’d work for nothing. She sure liked working.”

Editors learned to be careful with her copy, and it grew more time-consuming as she aged.

“We’d have to retype it,” Zeiler recalled. “But you got to be protective of her.”

Zeiler recalled Tony Hadley, the young reporter fresh out of journalism school who served as editor for a couple of years in the mid-1970s. His respect for B.K. grew out of the first uncertain interactions with B.K. He quickly learned to selectively edit her work.

“He was so fascinated with B.K. because she was older,” she said. “He was this fresh-faced, kind of younger-looking than his 22 years. He’d just come back and his head would shake and he’d say something like, ‘She’s so old.’ … And of course, we all wondered if we’d be writing at that age.”

Editor Hadley said he landed the assignment to “totally take care of B.K.” When Wednesday came around, B.K. called for him on the telephone.

“My copy’s ready, come and get it,” she demanded.

When Hadley arrived at the small room in the north wing of the nursing home west of Hamilton, he inevitably found B.K. at work, typing and putting on the finishing touches.

“She always had this essence that she was going to work on it until the deadline – she still had very much of a reporter in her,” Hadley recalled.
Hadley said B.K.'s copy was coherent except a few run-on sentences. Nevertheless, he learned the consequences of editing her work.

"Every change you made you had to deal with her about it," Hadley said. "She'd want to know why I changed it, how I improved it: 'What have you done here to improve it? If I couldn't justify it, I didn't make the changes.'

B.K. at age 96 warned in a column that her work might debilitate with age, but said she'd take that chance. "I have a mind," she wrote. "And just how authentic it can deliver might be questioned. But this is a trial run." 11

She still maintained a sense of integrity, including that she never had and she never would allow anyone to look over her shoulder or change her copy. "My work is a private employment as to weekly newspaper column supply," she wrote. "I want and need no help." 12

And while she permitted editors, she fought changes. Gilluly recalled her questioning. "I was forced to edit her and we occasional had an argument about editing - about once or twice a year," he said.

It was often about length, although B.K. was "not devious about it ... filling up a small town newspaper, you didn't worry about word count," he said, and so correspondents wrote to their hearts' content.

B.K.'s memory impressed many, including Gilluly. "She'd dust off an old story and just rework it - typical trick of correspondents," he said. "Well OK, that's fine and dandy and (new) people didn't know about it in the first place."

At the end of her life, B.K. suspected others might steal her ideas. Only a handful of Republic staff were allowed to collect her work, according to Ravalli Republic reporter
Pat Rhodes. As the copy deteriorated, only those who had a relationship with B.K. were able to decipher it. Her dedication to her work bordered on obsessive.

“She only trusted a few of us,” Rhodes recalled. “Her writing began to show the signs of her advancing age. (Reporter) Ruth Thorning always seemed to know what B.K. was talking about and could translate it into acceptable copy every time. I don’t think B.K. ever knew that someone was re-writing her stuff or I think she would have had a fit.”

At Valley View, B.K. carried an outstanding aura because of the constant typing for the newspaper, according to nurse’s aide Carrie Skalka-Squires. She worked at Valley View for about a year in the early 1980s.

Skalka-Squires, today a homemaker in Indiana, said she still imagines B.K. working in her room. “B.K. had so much determination to type one finger at a time – and you’d just hear that ‘peck-peck-peck,’” she recalled.

“It was a real cultural experience to visit with B.K. ... I was fascinated by her determination and positive attitude. She wasn’t going to pine away – she was there to live and keep living until the last breath that God had for her. She was fancy and pretty and precious and I enjoyed her.”

Skalka-Squires visited B.K. on her days off. Later, after she’d moved to Colorado, Skalka-Squires sold her antique furniture to fund a visit to Hamilton and to see B.K. “She was funny even in her seriousness, but you had to take time to discover that, you couldn’t just fly in and fly out,” Skalka-Squires said.

B.K. wanted her life “just so,” alienating some of the nurse’s aides. “Some of the aids would say, ‘B.K. is on a roll this morning.’” Skalka-Squires recalled. “She wanted to be in her dresses, she wanted to be taken care of, she was an aristocrat as far as my view.”
B.K. Monroe, far right, and friends, circa 1970
B.K. always set out her outfit and jewelry at night for the next morning.

“I helped her get dressed and special things that she wanted done,” she said. “She never wore slacks, never. … She had a right to want things done the way they were done. We were working in her home and all respect was due her … how I treated her. I have had a lot of great jobs, but the best job I ever had was nurse's aide at Hamilton manor.”

B.K. often ate alone in her room. Though she was never a drinker – even in the newspaper days B.K. didn’t share in the beer – in the nursing home she kept a bottle of Boone’s Strawberry Hill, a cheap wine, in her closet, according to grandson Michael Zoske. Her daughter, Ada Zoske, said B.K. might have had a little wine to keep up her appetite. 15

B.K.’s formality and sense of boundaries factored into her belief that playing cards and gambling was not appropriate, according to her niece Montana Trites. Trites also recalled a relaxed dinner party at which B.K. would not accept alcohol but took sips of Trites’ drink.

Granddaughter Toni Greer said when she visited B.K., she would be asked, “Where’s your man? I’m hungry for some man talk.”

“She wanted to shoot the breeze with my husband,” Greer said.

Greer wasn’t bothered by the assumptions of her grandmother, and tried to bring a little fun into her grandma’s life in the form of outdoor wheelchair races with B.K. and another resident. “We didn’t stroll. We ran ‘em and pushed and they’d yell, ‘Go faster!’” she said. She also recalled B.K. cheating at Scrabble. When called on it, B.K. answered, “Well, I write for a living, I’m right.” 16
A few residents at the nursing home laughed at B.K. when she told them former Sheriff Dale Dye had deputized her. So B.K. called up Dye, who brought her a badge and officially made her the official honorary sheriff’s deputy for years of dedicated reporting on crime in the valley. 17

B.K.’s historical writing kept up the interest of friends and fans, who dropped by with offerings of ideas or their own documents for her to research and form into a column. She also maintained her steady devotion to writing about pioneers, the Salish and the Dalys.

B.K. demonstrated special admiration for Margit, even when this most prominent person in the Bitterroot came under scrutiny for refusing hunting on the grounds of the Bitter Root Stock Farm, raising the ire of adjacent landowners who claimed crop damage from the burgeoning elk herd. 18

B.K. responded to the controversy by writing how Margit planned to use the productive ranch of the Stock Farm, why the mansion was barred up and shut off from the public, why the property was now fenced and why the new species of llamas proved of good business sense. 19 She painted Margit as a humble and an excellent horsewoman who was trying to keep the spirit of her grandfather. She qualified this by elaborating on her annual competitive trail rides. B.K. wrote: “Valley riders could tell volumes about the Besseneyey contribution to this trail business; Margit Besseneyey keeps her own counsel.” 20

When Besseneyey died in 1984, B.K. dealt with the loss by writing a 30-inch column on the history of the family and Margit. “She detested publicity as to her personal way of life,” B.K. wrote. “And at this sad breaking of her own lifetime, I can imagine my good
friend leaning over my shoulder. She would do so with an admonishing bit of non-praise because my own appreciation of the warm-hearted friendship we shared all the years that knew Margit’s splendid way of life and living.”

B.K.’s fascination with the elite contrasted her own pioneer upbringing and hard-scrabble life. When the Daly Mansion underwent renovations during the 1980s, expensive fund-raising dinners were held in its quarters. Somebody always bought B.K. a dinner ticket so she could attend. The Hedmans transported her. B.K. didn’t call for a ride every year, rather, “it was a ‘you-understand’ thing,” Helen Hedman said.

B.K. knew a thorough history of the mansion and wrote extensive news stories about the functions, so she became a fixture at Daly events. She dressed fancily, sometimes wearing a little fur stole, Helen Hedman recalled, and always acted quite formal at the dinners. She sent thank-you notes afterwards. “It seems she tried hard to do what was socially proper,” Hedman said. “There was a formality and a little distance was kept.”

She took herself seriously, and considered it a great honor when the community rewarded her. In 1980, she was named First Lady of the Bitter Root; Citizen of the Year with the Rocky Mountain Grange’s annual community service award in 1981; and Grand Marshal of the 1986 Fourth of July Parade. She was also named Grand Marshal of the annual Ravalli County Fair Parade – at age 92. B.K. formalized the honor with a thank-you column. She wrote:

To begin with the Ravalli County Fair has always been an institution filled with people lore. A county fair just couldn’t happen automatically. It simply comes into being because heads and hands and feet of citizens seem to have the specified power to get together a harvest show, to call attention as to what the good earth’s response to human effort can accomplish if they treat Old Mother Earth right. ...

As the line of vehicles and floats, led so happily by youthful spirits playing the marches of fairtime started the movement of everything on North Eighth Street’s square of Valley View Estates, my viewing was captivated. ...
In all the 50 years and more of Hamilton Fairtimes, the 1980 Main Street throng eclipsed any other memory. ...

So it went, even from my seat as marshal in a white Cadillac, chauffered by pretty Claudia Driscoll, I forgot all about dignity, for me it would have been completely out of place. I could only gaze and wave my good right hand to be just one of the lucky persons to have a part in the beautiful testimonial that the Ravalli County Fair of 1980 proved to be as a work of Ravalli County’s wonder-working citizens. And viewing the exhibits of homemaking enterprise brought assurance that good home cooking, baking and canning for family households was still a prime deal, not to be outdone by the package deal line. 25

But in an interview with a nationally syndicated newspaper supplement in 1981, her remarks echoed humility. “I don’t claim to be anything special,” B.K. said. “I am just interested in people and what they are doing. I like people. They are what life is all about.” 26

In 1975, after Ada Zoske’s husband died, grandson Michael Zoske had the difficult job of telling B.K., who was now 87, that she would not be moving in with her daughter just because Ada suddenly had more room in her Hamilton home. He recalled it took a long period of time before his grandmother behaved normally toward him. Soon after this episode, she documented her possessions, writing:

“List of Possessions in Room 44 Valley View Estates As of October 20, 1975:”
1 Desk with chair
1 Typewriter with table
1 chiffonier 5-drawer
1 Wall mirror ...
1 small “Old Lady pattern,” mixed colors afghan; 1 plaid lap robe.
5 twin-size bed sheets; 2 fitted flower pattern bottom sheets – twin size. half-dozen pillow slips-two green, others white ...
10 framed pictures hanging; 2 Bitter Root scene mats on wardrobe door. 1 keepsake lunchcloth ...
1 hot pot and assorted china pieces ...
Some of these items are gifts, but mainly I’ve purchased them with earned money.
BKM. 27
She held the possessions left in her care dear to her heart, and made the list to protect what belonged to her. And perhaps by 1975 she began to feel a sense of ownership in her nursing home room after the reality check of not being invited to live with her daughter.

Her view, her single room – the lot of it wasn’t enough. A letter to her nephew, Paul Kerlee, written from the nursing home in 1983, includes her yearning to get out in the world. She found ways by begging for rides or responding to social invitations, but she was limited. The Soroptomists, she told Paul, invited her to discuss the history of the Bitterroot Valley, to “expound as to the ‘Good Old Days’ – from a wheelchair” at their meeting, she wrote. “It will be getting out of my ‘cubical’ at least into the spring-like air,” she added. 28

She lovingly described wild flowers brought to her. In a letter to Paul, she told how her friend had described abundant wild flowers up the West Fork of the Bitterroot River. “Wish I could take another trip up there,” she wrote. 29

She was proud of her ability to keep working. She wrote a feature for the Montana Standard about her life at the rest home. “But my room still has a desk, typewriter and table, telephone and wastebasket, as in all of my newspaper years. A news nose never dies,” she wrote. 30

When she wasn’t writing correspondence or typing columns, B.K. busied herself maneuvering somebody to take her for a country drive. Her friends the Appleburys offered her countless country drives, and a half-dozen columns refer to those drives with gratitude, no doubt inspiring more attention.

After a Christmas trip, she wrote about the Appleburys:

As usual I was helped to that front seat by the driver’s wife, while she climbed into the rear seat. That happens to be the method of road hospitality for Ruth and Ned Applebury.
Their plan for a backcountry ride and maybe seeing deer or other game, now that hunting season was over, sounded fine and as he turned south from Hamilton on U.S. 93, a mental wish — “I hope we go up the East Fork” turned out to be the Applebury plan. …

Although we were in mountain sheep country, not a wild wooley did we see. Other times the three of us recalled sighting as many as sixteen on the hills. …

There was a disquieting thought — have they killed off all the game? That of course was not probably, but there had been hopes for the living picture of deer or sheep or both, browsing among the brush.  

Her family members knew B.K. wanted out — and often. Grandson Tony Zoske recalled B.K. as self-centered, especially about country drives. “Everybody had to do for her — she was … demanding,” he said. “I’d be working and she’d call and say, ‘Come down here and take me for a ride.’” Once, Tony Zoske said, his grandmother held a grudge for two years because he refused to take her for a ride.  

Michael Zoske recalled B.K. would call and say, “I haven’t been for a ride,” when she had been out every day.

“Her favorite ride was to go up to the old homestead up Tin Cup — she’d tell us stories about that,” he said. “And Como Bridge, or to Darby for a hamburger. She liked to drive over Sleeping Child.”  

But to Michael Zoske, a hilarious and telling incident occurred two years before she died. During a nasty lightning storm, his phone rang. It was B.K. She needed someone to take her letter up to the Republic.

“First thing you think: ‘I’m not going to do that,’” Michael Zoske recalled. “Then I started to laugh. Here it is 40 years later.”

Zoske dashed out to the nursing home, collected B.K.’s copy and took it down to the newspaper — just as he had countless times decades ago as a child.
When Margit Besseneyey died, B.K., could not continue to finance a single room. She pressured her children for help with indirect tactics, though none could afford to supplement her desire.

One visit with daughter Ruth included a two-hour drive through the Bitter Root Stock Farm east of Hamilton – Marcus Daly’s stomping grounds. B.K. reminisced on the family she so admired, by writing about the experience to her nephew:

And time was carriages and buggies and even carts, as well as hay and grain wagons before the motor age took over.

Dear Montana woman that Mrs. Daly was, she kept up the “Home place” until she died here in 1941. She was a dear Montana person to the last and her son Marcus II was here much of the time, but he died before his mother died. No there are no more living Daly family members.

Paul – that is a sample of life pioneered even by the wealthy.  

B.K. romanticized the Dalys because they represented the supreme reward of hard work and single-minded dedication. With all the faults and contributions of any rich family, B.K. found the Dalys – and especially Marcus Daly – a patriotic symbol of the promise of the American dream, which she lived in her own exclusive way.

Soon after, the following letter illustrated how B.K. maneuvered through a personal dilemma of the absence of Daly money after Margit died. It was a letter to her daughter, Hazel, whom she refers to with the childhood nickname “Toots,” and Hazel’s husband, Bud. It offers touching insight into her relationship with those closest to her – her children – and evidence of her expected struggle through the aging process. She wrote:

Dear Toots and Bud,

In a fit of extravagance the other day, I bought this pretty stationary and you are the first to get a note. I had anxiously waited for Monday to bring mail as there had been none for the weekend. Your dear card with its down-to-earth in a daughter-to-old mom heart talk. When I called Ada to tell her about it, she really gave me back the heart ease that I needed. “Yes, Mother, Toots and Bud sent me a check for $30 and I will put 20 dollars up there in Valley View for your use.” She gave me a check book again last week. That was all an honest-to-God “shot-in-the-arm.”
My telephone talks with Ruth haven’t been too satisfactory. For the first information was brusk (sic).

She answered when I called after The Bessenyey deal as to no more income. And was surely in bad humor. “Mother I’m telling you that I couldn’t possibly pay for your room. I’ve put in time to account for it from my side and if I did that I would have to go and live with my kids.” And it was all in an unkind way that hurt. I hadn’t asked Ruth nor have I asked any of you to take on such a hunk of expense for me. Ruth has cooled down since but I know exactly where I stand with her and with all of you four Monroe “kids.”

I never expected to move in with any of you. I know you and Bud have more than made it back to me for anything I did in the post-war years and whichever one of the others advised you of the upset in my present lifestyle didn’t consult me. Ada has been the mainstay since she still lives in Hamilton and she has made any and all of the other of our Monroe clan welcome to her home. …

So far the service includes my laundry which I formerly paid the Bitter Root Laundry to do. It is a big help. The only furniture that Valley View has is the bed, but I’ve had my own linen and my own “Dove soap” and desk big dresser. They took other bits of furniture to their homes. My high-back chair and a lot of things. So that I do not feel I’ve been unfair to them. Ada is still sweet as ever.

Enough for now. But I hadn’t even thought of hearing from you, let alone in such a hearty and kindly way.

And you Toots were “the baby that 1920 Dr. Owens said – “Bessie you come back and we’ll take care of that. It is too bad, but the five are all you can take care of.”

I thanked him, walked out of his office and I never saw him again. Dr. Hayward, God Bless him, brought you into my life and you were with me longer than the others when you were a grown-up young Monroe.

All for now. Love Mom. 36

Grandson Mike Radspinner recalled the family’s attempt to keep peace around B.K., who wasn’t afraid to demand exactly what she wanted. One year, B.K. traveled to North Dakota, and the Radspinner family packed into the car to have Thanksgiving dinner out at a restaurant, all a ploy to keep B.K. out of the kitchen. “She was most horrific cook in the world,” he said. 37

B.K. treasured her family history. She tracked genealogy and shared it with all who visited her. In the summer of 2000, a hundred members of the Kerlee family congregated in the Bitterroot Valley for a reunion. B.K.’s name came up more than once, in speeches and honoring of the family’s history keepers.
"She was our hero," said reunion organizer Krikit Kerlee of Plano, Texas, during the first night's celebration. "This (reunion) is probably all thanks to her. She kept it alive and did our family history. ... She never let me forget the fact that I was Kerlee blood."

B.K. typed their histories and passed them down to her children. The documents included basic birth, marriage, children and death. They read like resumes.

She described her young husband, Roy Park Hayes Monroe, whose natural father was a Montana Territory legislator for 12 years, as orphaned at two years. She also wrote, "Naturally a scholar and a creditable craftsman, knowledge of chemistry gained at Butte school." 38

For herself, B.K. included her exact score on her eight-grade examination (and second in her class). She offered insight into her marriage — both she and her spouse were avid readers and members of Episcopal church — and said she learned from being a forest ranger’s wife about the ideals of the forest. She wrote, "Lived in tents and cabins with my ranger, a good life that paid more in experience than money." Then she wrote a short synopsis of her news career, and ended with: "At 88 am still a free lance feature writer. Have book of poetry — Bitter Root and Other Verse now in third edit since 1954." 39

B.K. developed an ongoing correspondence with the wife of Frank Lloyd Wright and leaders of the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, providing them with history and documents she had collected. 40 B.K. concluded that early in his career Wright designed a house on Third Street in Hamilton, known as the Tucker House, which is the only purported Wright structure standing today. She also said he built a couple of homes in Missoula, some Bitterroot Valley clubhouses, including Charles Heights Community Club and the Bitter Root Inn, which was the only structure to prove useful at his
dreamed-up Bitter Root Town Site. The subdivision was promoted by a Midwesterner who had a company, Como Orchard Land Company, which promoted these 50 planned "bungalow" houses to University of Chicago professors. Wright lost money in the deal, B.K. wrote. Only eight bungalows and an office were built, and the Bitter Root Inn burned down less than 20 years after it was constructed, though it was well-used. The town site was Wright's first and only attempt at community planning, B.K. concluded. Her Wright research was respected, according to publisher John Barrows. And B.K. must have agreed. "This writer was given authentic information by business and professional people who personally knew the promoters and the architect, Frank Lloyd Wright," she wrote. "Two of the projects are listed in the Wright Biographies." The Wright Foundation began sending B.K. books and materials. She used that as a point to remind readers that she knew Mrs. Frank Lloyd Wright, who sent B.K. a biography she compiled about her husband that confirmed some of what B.K. had researched.

Word of Wright's life in the valley must have struck a chord of interest with some other history seekers, but B.K. grew tired of lazy researchers poking around in her work. In a 1972 column, she snapped:

Since the different years of this writer's reporting about this orchard boom fiasco, men and women proclaiming urgent need of data about the time of Wright in the Bitter Root have popped up until this past year has seen a rash of these would-be historians hitting the news media from all directions. They want the whole story handed to them gratis. The research and knowledge of writers who live here has been hard gotten and truthful and has been work performed without hope for glory. Today's seekers after Frank Lloyd Wright information should have enough respect for the memory of "The World's Greatest Architect" to go to the source of information instead of shadowing writers and news folks who have respect for Wright Foundation gained through association.
Though B.K. no longer worked at the Missoulian, she remained active by filing letters to the editor once or twice a year. Some turned into guest columns, such as her piece, “... and the history of the bitterroots,” written in June of 1982. She began with: “Once upon a time I was a Bitterroot Valley writer for the Missoulian and I’m still loyal to the memory of the years when Missoulian editors kept me on the payroll.”

Five years later, she sent a similar column to the Missoulian. She included the specific history of the bitterroot becoming the “state floral emblem,” and how the plow is its biggest threat. She wrote:

Even if the Indian folks did (and still may do) depend on a late spring dig of the little pink flower roots as a good food item, they respect the need to leave roots as a source of pioneer lore as well as “medicine man” diet.

In 1978, B.K. wrote a commentary in response to the death of her friend, Mary Ann Combs. Just a month earlier, B.K. had had coffee with her and discussed the history of Darby. Combs, the last living Salish to have been exiled out of the Bitterroot Valley, told B.K. with a twinkle in her eye, “We were both born at Darby but there was no Darby.”

Combs death in June was a blow for B.K., who wrote:

The Bitter Root was given up; a heritage instead of a country won by bloodshed. Pride still lived in the fine character of Mary Ann Pierre Combs at 96; her memories of the lost Bitter Root began when she was a girl aged nine, the daughter of Louie and Nancy Pierre.

Mary Ann, proud of race, harbored no grudge in her late years.

“I don’t hate anymore.”

What a lesson for all of us, God bless her soul. The last encampment up there will be well deserved by this Grand Old Woman of Montana’s Heritage.

Another guest column designed around B.K.’s love for tradition how the legendary pioneers named rivers, streams, areas and mountains. It isn’t clear whether B.K. was directly influenced to write the column because of a mis-named creek in the Missoulian or otherwise, but she ended with:
These incidents that create legends are true happenings. Sometimes new writers drift in and the first idea they have seems to be discrediting the original writers. Overwich Creek once knew mining settlers and even a district school, where an Overturf daughter was teacher. There never was an outlandish German name like Ober-something. Writers get old, yes, but still with memory and a clear mind, they do battle for their legends and the storied tragedies or happy events that make their history worthy.  

In a letter to the Montana Standard, B.K. wrote to remind readers that she — a Kerlee who still wrote for her home paper — was also a Monroe, and the Monroe family had lived in Butte early in the century. She wrote that the Monroes were loyal to Butte, and that she always loved writing “Bitter Root news for the Standard.”  

B.K. also penned hard-hitting letters to the editor, including two in defense of Jeanette Rankin. In the following she responds to critique of Rankin’s stance against World Wars I and II. B.K. wrote:  

That slam at the memory of the Bitter Root’s own Jeannette Rankin was too much for other natives of this valley, where Montana got her start.  

I knew Jeannette Rankin as a friend, she would visit here after her time as the Montana congresswoman. She drove up to my home to visit and ask me to take a ride with her to her ranch about two miles west of Hamilton. ...  

Her adventuring heart was still in this valley she loved, and by that time Jeannette Rankin was history-wise as to World War I and the awful number of Montana young men, including our Bitter Root, who gave up “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” for the cause of America called them to defend to ensure “World freedom for all wars.” She said, “I want to stand by my country, but I cannot vote for war!” Well, how well we know, we mothers whose sons gave their hearts to World War I and the succeeding “cold wars that turned hot as hell,” one veteran’s summing-up said. Oh sure enough Jeannette Rankin was a woman and when she went to that first job for Montana in Congress, neither she nor any of Montana’s women got put in the polls to vote. No say as to what they wished for our wonderful country.  

“Leave that to the men folks.” Well, this writer has worked in a man’s world, the newspaper field, since 1918 in Montana, and is still at it, as a fringe job of life. I claim it is time for Jeannette Rankin’s memory to be revered as a woman patriot.  

A year and a half later, B.K. wrote again about Rankin, this time congratulating her for being ahead of her time by refusing to vote for war. She wrote:
I know Jeannette Rankin was a staunch Republican and she was twice elected to Congress on the Republican ticket.

When she first entered that Star campaign that ended with her winning the congressional honor of “first woman to serve in that United States forum of law-making,” I was a “know-nothing” correspondent for the Butte Miner at Twin Bridges.

When Jeanette failed to see the need - if there was one? - of World War I, I thought she was behind the times. Yet I was proud of the Montana woman for her stand. I know now that Jeannette Rankin was ahead of her time. 54

Two examples of B.K. directly arguing against an article that had appeared in the Missoulian illustrate her ability to be straightforward and caustic. She was known for the letters, and former Republic publisher John Barrows mentioned that in a story on the impact of B.K. on the community. He wrote, “When a newspaper up north gets on her nerves, she is just as apt to let loose a barrage of wit and critique.” 55

In 1981, she responded to a Missoulian feature on Bitterroot Valley people having to grow their own produce to survive. B.K. wrote:

Fighting starvation in the Bitter Root Valley! Holy Smoke!!! The hardship of planting a garden to grow green vegetables and digging hills in a potato patch instead of counting pennies – or dollar bills maybe – but who has dollar bills?

A lot of us native sons and daughters who still hang around in this home valley were irked about a recent feature in the Missoulian, relative to the plight of apparently non-natives or newcomers who are having to resort to home produce in order to make ends meet or whatever it is that ends ought to be doing.

The Ravalli County Fair here in Hamilton which this 93-year-old ex-Missoulian reporter attended from 1922 until 1981, is the Bitter Root’s own annual show of home-raised, glass-jar-canned fruits, vegetables, preserves, pickles, even meat and trout that make a live picture of home industry.

There have always been displays of potatoes, big cabbages, turnips, beets, ripened onions, cauliflower and cucumbers, as well as big pumpkins and squash, even watermelon and cantelloup (sic). Toil-in-the-garden, then to the kitchen, finally to finished display that MOTHERS took to the county fair year in and year out. Artists all, these homemakers.

Loaves and more loaves of bread, even biscuits, cakes, pies – you name the rest of the baked goods show, even in this “starvation threatened” year. PHOOEY on the implication of that feature. 56

Perhaps her most memorable letter to the editor she wrote in response to Missoulian columnist Evelyn King who wrote satirically about women being labeled “emotional” for
behaviors which would appear normal in a man. She completed her dry admonition of those who stereotype women with a satirical perspective on women growing older, saying, “After that, she was just another old lady.”  

B.K. read King wrong and completely missed her approach. She believed King was seriously putting women down. She fired off a letter to the editor, which ran in the Missoulian and later in a Ravalli Republic special tribute to B.K.’s work. She wrote:

For the first time yet, as a news friend of years, I wanted to throw a ball into your field and land it squarely on your typewriter. I never want to be called “a nice old Lady.” Not even if, in another 13 and one-half years, I hit the century mark. Can’t we just be women?

I worked for newspapers, including the Missoulian that French Ferguson called the Old Reliable (OR for short) for nigh onto 50 years and I held down another job, keeping a roof over my six dependents and keeping each in school for the prescribed 12 years. Each lived with mom until high schools diplomas were handed them, one every two years or so. There was no time to be a lady or high stylish.

Yes, I went every place a man would go on my news beat, and a lot of places they wouldn’t – and I loved it all. Best loved though were the constructive deals like building U.S. 93 over the old Bitter Root Valley Northern Pacific Railroad right-of-way, paving highways and the Hamilton streets, watching as a couple of governors, Aronson of Montana and Jordan of Idaho sawed a log to officially open U.S. 93 on the Montana-Idaho state line. Aronson told Jordon to “quit draggin’ your feet.” Then they each stopped to load a bit of snoose when a wag set a can of Copenhagen on the log. No dainty ribbon cutting. Gosh, I loved that, even if it was raining.

As to the classification “just another old lady” Evelyn dear, our white heads may bring a thought of snowflakes, but let it be this: No two snowflakes are alike – individuals all.

And if one thinks it is easy for women to get along with one another, even in what are termed the serene years when age is counted by the score instead of the single year, guess again. We are still the souls we have a right to be, not one is just another old lady.

Your once-upon-a-time colleague.

B.K. Monroe

In August of 1982, seven years after the letter, B.K. fell and broke her hip. One week after she returned from hospital, Evelyn King came down the valley to visit her old friend. “I can’t talk, laying about in bed,” B.K. declared.
At the end of their conversation B.K. said she’d be back at the typewriter by in time for her September birthday. She told Evelyn that she’d be celebrating her “22nd on the 94th.” 60 Evelyn wrote about their visit:

Every week B.K. sends down one of her “dispatches to the Republic newsroom. You never know what it might contain. There might be an old valley photograph, yellowed with age and brittle around the edges. There might be a poem, or a meandering remembrance of earlier days and ways.

It might be a thoughtful, almost philosophical piece on people, places, events life itself. And then again, it might be a light humorous piece.

... She has done it all. Filed. Reported. Edited. And above all, wrote.

... But most of all, she is a part of the valley, as much a part of the mountains and St. Mary’s Mission and Fort Owen and the Daly Mansion.

A part of the valley that overcomes adversity, hard-times, death, paralysis. And still she persists — letting the valley in on what went before. She is a tie with the past — and still very much in present. She is — B.K. 61

B.K. must have felt a certain duty to the business and its requirements — fairness, accuracy and good judgment. It comes as no surprise that she quickly pointed out the faults of others — at times with delicacy, at other times without. An example of the former occurred in a review she did on the book of a friend, Lucille Evans, who wrote, “St. Mary’s of the Rockies.” She wrote:

Lucille Evans first book has meant hours and hours of study and she has set down fact, glorified by the sacrifices made by the noble Jesuits. What of a few typographical errors! These have a hidden meaning — “Look for the right spelling.” After 50 years of “typo headaches” — my advice: Don’t take it out on the author. 62

In 1979, without mercy, B.K. slammed a reporter from the Lewiston, Idaho Tribune, who wrote about the Bitterroot Valley in a travel report that followed the trail of Lewis and Clark. B.K. accused reporter Cassandra Tate of fabrication, misinformation, and laziness.

Tate had written that Hamilton consisted of a Grange hall, a couple of natural food stores, a taxidermist and a “huge smokestack of obscure and dubious history.” She also
wrote: "There is general agreement among the patrons of a local café that the stack was built as part of a sugar beet factory, begun and abruptly abandoned many years ago ..."63 She went on to say that it had been constructed in the 1930s. Though her story is about Lewis and Clark, Tate doesn’t mention their passage through the Bitterroot.

So B.K. wrote at length a more accurate history of the smokestack (built 20 years earlier than Tate thought) and portrayed the trail of Lewis and Clark through Hamilton.64

B.K. wrote:

Tate may have come through the Bitter Root on stilts for all this news scatterbrain can tell. For her information, Hamilton is home of the Rocky Mountain Laboratory, a unit of the National Institutes of Health, is county seat of Ravalli County, headquarters of the Bitter Root National Forest, has a dozen churches, has four elementary schools and an accredited high school and its business downtown includes cafes of everyday patronage, maybe a dozen – including swanky dining places, some in the suburbs. ... Hamilton has a daily newspaper, up-to-date telephone and even telegraph service, radio and television, in fact all the modern systems of communication. It even had outreach that reverses to bring in bigger dailies and it has more reporters per capita than most towns its size, so her own news goes far into the universe. Too bad a news woman like Tate listened only to smokestack murmurs.65

A mere three weeks later, B.K. went after an AP error. Her column corrected and praised AP for owning up to it after B.K. notified them. She wrote:

This Republic reporter sent a protest to the AP at once, giving the actual place of (painter Charlie) Russell’s work and of the historic meeting of Lewis and Clark with the Salish-Kootenai Indians and Shoshones at Camp Creek Ridge on the south rim of Ross Hole.

Saturday, the Republic writer received a letter from a Helena AP staffer, Hugh Van Swearingen, chief of bureau, acknowledging the AP error.66

When Joseph Kinsey Howard came to Hamilton to meet with a history group, he also visited B.K. at her apartment. Why, B.K. wanted to know, had he completely omitted the Bitterroot Valley from his book, Montana: High, Wide and Handsome, which was otherwise quite thorough? B.K. wrote of his response:
Broaching the subject ... I queried the author who said – ‘Call me Joe’ – I said, fine Joe and I’m just B.K. His reply came with a touch of humility and in perfect truth. “B.K., I had never been to the Bitter Root and to me Great Falls seemed to be farthest west in Montana. I was actually ignorant as to the Bitter Root and I admit it.” He then said he would make up for the lapse.  

He asked and learned more about the Bitterroot while they enjoyed coffee with a companion of Howard’s. A few months later, Howard died of a heart attack, never having the chance to honor his promise, according to B.K.  

B.K. wrote historical accounts for the remarkably thorough book compilation about pioneer history, Bitterroot Trails, published in 1982 by the historical society, but her efforts, she felt, didn’t receive enough credit. Her personal copies of Bitterroot Trails contain her signature she scribbled in various manifestations throughout the book: “Bessie K. Monroe,” “B.K.M.,” “B.K.,” “B.K.M.Script.,” “B.K. Monroe Research,” and “B.K. Monroe.” B.K.’s notes clarify and correct contributions and photograph captions, and in her late age, was unforgiving. Her notations were hallmark B.K. style, self-confident in accuracy and exhibiting the impression she presented throughout her life that she might as well have seen it, for the record. The books were edited and primarily authored by Lena Eversole Bell, Henry Hamilton Grant and Phyllis Ford Twogood, but B.K.’s declared a sense of being left out. Before the books reached publication, Twogood died. Perhaps B.K. felt a bit resentful about not being included with more credit. She wrote on the first page:  

The truth. B.K. Monroe was Phyllis Ford Twogood’s near and dear friend and the First vice president with Phyllis Twogood as President.  

And, in response to the book’s introduction, which refers to “Father John Peter DeSmet,” B.K. added her ‘two-cents’:
The Jesuit Priest who led the 1841 Expedition of six missionaries from St. Louis Missouri to the Bitter Root Valley in Montana, wrote volumes about the long journey. He wrote his own story and his own name. His signature was Pierre Jean De Smet, not John Peter DeSmet. (Signed) B.K. Monroe Research.

She also scribbled in the book:

For the truth. Bessie K. Monroe as a Hamilton newspaper reporter after her year as Darby correspondent for the Missoulian was the close friend of Phyllis Ford Twogood for ten years and as vice president with Phyllis for the first year of the Bitter Root Historical Society. Not recorded herein.

In other volumes of her Bitterroot Trails books she added that she was the “first reporter” to cover an incident, or again, that she was the first elective vice-president of the historical society. The books failed to include that. “Why?” she asked, but of course received no answer.

In 1983, B.K. received a letter from Charles Briggs, state aging coordinator in the office of Montana Governor Ted Schwinden, who congratulated her not only for “ninety-five years on this planet, but nearly seventy years as a journalist.” The letter said:

Your years of public service and bedrock community living provide an invaluable link between Montana’s past and present. …

It is fellow citizens such as yourself who provide substantial inspiration and challenge to those younger, who hold a dear conviction that a life best lived is one plunged into the middle of community life and statewide activities.

Eight months later, B.K. received another letter from Briggs, thanking her for responding to him. Her prompt reply to his greeting must have struck a chord, for Briggs shared with B.K. — someone he’d never met — of his father coping with Alzheimer’s and how B.K. was an inspiration for her continued contribution to the community, despite her diminishing health. He asked if he could call on her from time to time to discuss ideas or issues. He wrote:

I was, frankly, profoundly moved by your letter, and shared it with the Governor. He responded in kind, and asks your permission to quote you sometime in the future.
You have underlined something often missed in discussing the needs of aging citizens and the programs that are in place, the utmost importance of affirming the right of dignity and individual treatment of all older persons, and not pitying them.

One afternoon, young editor Hadley came to see B.K. and heard the tapping sound he’d heard so many times before. This time she was in tears at her typewriter. A dear friend had died and B.K. was writing an obituary. She did not apologize but said she had written several obituaries of close friends. Hadley wrote about the moment:

“"It happens a lot when you get older but it’s something I’ll never get used to," she commented, and then dried her tears and went back to work.

Watching her, I tried to visualize just what kind of person she had been during her more active years. Determined – that’s the word I thought of. She would have had to be if her present pace is any clue.

An example is a memorial written for her childhood friend, Esther Shockley Sargent, 16 days before B.K. died. B.K. spoke of Sargent’s brave pioneer family fondly. B.K.’s writing provides insight into her own take on life and death and on the passage through old age. She wrote:

How many of us “Senior Citizens” are billed to “stick around” and possibly get credit from the powers-that-be for jobs done in a lifetime of activities in our home neighborhoods? ... “Growing older,” in spite of efforts not to give up to old age, can be a trial to those of us with a spirit much younger than our aging bodies. Esther’s was such a spirit. It was her desire to continue independently as long as her mind and will could command her body. She fulfilled that wish for all but the last short months of life. Hurrah for her, a true pioneer woman of the Bitterroot!

We each are more or less the same, fighting off age and its many weaknesses. This old timer can actually mourn Esther as a lifelong friend while treasuring memories of far-distant girlhood days.

This writer can claim memoires (sic) of welcome in the Tin Cup neighborhood’s own way. The Shockley family tenanted the homestead of James DeCatur Kerlee when the early Tin Cup vale embraced the Alee Chaffin, John Schofield and Walter Whinney families, after the Kerlee move to a north Darby’s ranch in the early 1890s.

Memories – how they haunt a native-grown-old in this bit of western Montana.

Her granddaughter Robin Lee recalled B.K. dealing gracefully with change. She took her grandma for a drive on U.S. 93 south, which was about to be improved, on a visit
later in B.K.'s life. They drove south of Hamilton to Lick Creek, where B.K. imagined Sacajawea of the Lewis and Clark expedition had stopped near a rock for a rest and to gaze at the jagged side of a mountain.

B.K. told Robin the widening highway and increasing population did not bother her.

"This does mean in many respects progress – this is progress, Robin," she said. "I look ahead. ... Don't go back. This is progress and I love progress."

B.K. loved tradition, too, and as she aged her view of the Salish changed and her columns reflected a more compassionate and regretful response to what had happened to the American Indians. In 1978, Mary Ann Combs was the only living member of the Salish-Kootenai tribal families that were forced by starvation out of the valley. She had been 9 years old when her people left. B.K. recalled Combs:

If ever there was a more staunch American woman than Mary Ann Pierre Combs, none have appeared over the horizon that once was a purely Indian skyline along the Bitter Root River. ...

Mary Ann has witnessed the passing of all the lineal chiefs since Victor and Charlot over the ranges to the "Happy Hunting Grounds" that, to the Indian peoples of the West, meant their kind of heaven. ...

Mary Ann has so many memories, so many legends tucked therein, but she has found a contented life on her heritage acres near Arlee.

B.K. met Mary Ann Combs, last living person of Chief Charlot’s Salish tribe forced to leave the valley for the Flathead Reservation, and had her photograph taken with her.

The photo hung on B.K.'s wall until she died. She wrote:

She told the whole story to me that time with Ned and Ruth Applebury along. They took me on the trip to the Flathead Valley to meet Mary Ann at her home near the Jocko River. Her son Abel Combs took the wonderful picture of Mary Ann, Abel, Ned and me.
Mary Ann died in June of 1978. A few weeks earlier had been her last visit to the valley, and with B.K. She came each summer and fall to St. Mary’s Chapel, and in early June to pick bitterroots as her people had for centuries before her.

B.K. credited Combs with changing her own perspective on the Salish. She wrote:

And all her years, she helped in preserving the history that was so deeply concerned with the Indians – the Salish led by Chief Charlot and their compatriots, the Kootenai tribe, headed by Chief Koostata.

I visited Mary Ann Combs and her son, Abel, at her home in the Jocko Valley late in the summer of 1977 not far from the town of Arlee. A well-kept log home and other buildings spoke in their own quiet way of thrift and a good country life. Love had come after a time when her girlhood gave place to marriage and little children. When her good man Louie Combs shared the Jocko farm with her and became known for horsemanship as well as farming, gradually Mary Ann put her whole heart into homemaking and the Bitter Root childhood became a memory that probably wove stories to tell her own children about her Trapper Creek birthplace and the trail north to St. Mary’s Mission where the good Jesuit priests and nuns taught the Christian way of life and book learning. ...

I am indebted to Mary Ann Combs for a new insight into the Indian heart and mind. 81

Her friendship with Mary Ann Combs was “one of my very best heart-thrilling friendships,” B.K. said in an interview less than a month before she died. 82

At age 88, B.K. drove with her daughter, Ada Zoske, and a grandson to tour the haunts of her youth. They stopped at the Darby cemetery – Lone Pine at the north edge of town – and found friends and ancestors in the graveyard that once was B.K.’s and her parents’ second home in Montana.

James Kerlee, B.K.’s father, donated the land for a Darby cemetery just before the turn of the century. Her mother, Mary Sally Kerlee, named it Lone Pine for a single tree in the original burial field. It was smaller then, a fenced field of graves – only the south side of the current site – that today serves as resting place for the Kerlee plot. Later half
of the 40 acres were later sold to school and residences, and across the road the Forest Service and a few other residences bought land for building.\textsuperscript{83}

B.K.'s parents also contributed to the community after their children left by taking in orphans. Even after James died, Mary at age 70 raised four of her grandchildren who had lost their mother. In 1942, Mary Sally died.

B.K.'s daughter, Ada Zoske, said one of the few times she saw B.K. cry was when she couldn't make it home in time for the funeral of own mother, Mary Sally. B.K. had been visiting one of her daughters in Ohio and the funeral wasn't delayed for her return.

Bringing flowers to family graves, B.K. stopped to query the caretaker about a new scar on the tree for which her mother had named the cemetery.

The two-forked pine ... is like a sentinel on duty always alone, and I noticed a clean scar near the foot; the care-taker told me a windstorm last year had broken the branch, but good “tree surgery” had healed the pine and saved it from further loss.\textsuperscript{84}

After laying flowers on the graves, B.K. and her family proceeded to tour the West Fork. They drove back through town and glanced at the cemetery again to remember the old home. B.K. was sentimental:

Time is long past since I could name every home in the Darby Cemetery, or even Hamilton my home for over 50 years. New people, new houses, larger schools ... it is a good picture and since mortals cannot live forever, the burial grounds of the Bitter Root Valley all give mute testimony to the honored work of living folks who strive each year to keep the generations of their home cemeteries memorable; grief of bygone years changes to quiet memories of the names on gravestones.\textsuperscript{85}

B.K.'s parents, five of their children including three sons, a daughter and B.K are buried in the Kerlee plot. It is located center of what is now the south side of the cemetery. One of the sons buried there is 14-year-old Virgil Eugene Kerlee, the Kerlees' youngest son born in Darby, who drowned in the Bitter Root River in June of 1908.\textsuperscript{86}

But B.K.'s spirit was uplifted that day.
“An old house may pass from view, but the spirit of home never leaves the hearts that once knew its shelter,” she later wrote.  

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2. Interview with Toni Greer, July, 2000.
3. Barrows interview.
4. Rhodes interview.
6. Zeiler interview.
7. Zeiler interview.
8. Gilluly interview.
9. Ibid.
10. Zeiler interview.
11. Hadley interview.
14. Rhodes interview.
17. Dye interview.
20. Ibid.
34. Zoske interview.
37. Mike Radspinner interview.
39. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
The town where B.K. Monroe found his fortune was a bustling place. He had been a young boy when he first saw the town, and the memory of it had stayed with him ever since.

Here, we find the story of how B.K. Monroe returned to the town where he had grown up. His family had moved away when he was young, but he had always wanted to come back and see what had changed.

"I was only 10 years old when I first saw B.K.'s Bitter Root," he said. "It was a magical place, and I knew I had to come back someday.

The town was a place where anything was possible. The local newspaper was full of stories of adventure and excitement. People from all over the world came to visit the town and see its beauty.

B.K. Monroe was one of those people. He had left the town when he was young and had been away for many years. But now he was back, and he wanted to see what had changed.

The town was still the same, but the people had changed. B.K. Monroe was glad to see that the town was still a place where anything was possible. He knew that he would always come back to B.K.'s Bitter Root.
I know that it would never do
For the sweet lark to stay all year,
Because we never know a song
That we can always hear.1

Chapter Nine: Final Days

The day after B.K. died, Ravalli Republic managing editor James Robinson published an editorial called, “Coming to Terms with B.K.”

Here, he admitted that earlier that year he had wanted to fire the elderly woman because she was out-of-date and rambling in her writing. He quickly learned otherwise.

“It was promptly inferred that after only two weeks on the job I was a more expendable than someone who had been doing it for 70 years,” he wrote. “It did seem incongruous for a 25-year-old rookie to fire a 98-year-old veteran. Somehow I would have to come to terms with this little old lady.” 2 Upon suggestion, he decided to go and meet her. Robinson walked into her room at Valley View. He recalled:

The hand I shook was limp, a concession to her eyes and tongue, where all her life was concentrated.

I introduced myself and she called me Bob and after she gave me her column, scrawled by hand on plain white paper, she pointed to a number of photographs that lined the wall above her bed.

“These were my friends,” she said.

She pointed to a picture of Chief Joseph, another of Chief Charlo, one of Chief Victor and the last of Margaret Daly. We talked awhile and I left.

I began to read B.K.’s column more closely and I realized it was more than journalism. It was lore.

Her writing began to make more sense, if not in content, certainly in form.

She wrote more clearly when she was mad about something. It was an ability we shared.

But more than anything, B.K. loved being a journalist. You would be hard pressed to find a recent column where she didn’t make reference to her job.

She worried about her copy. On Wednesday nights it was common to field half a dozen phone calls from her. They were always one-sided affairs. She called to see if you had her copy and would it run the next day and when she was done talking she didn’t wait for a response or exchange pleasantries. She just hung up. She didn’t have time to be saying goodbye all the time.
And so it was appropriate that she died at 7:30 p.m., just when a small town newspaper yawns and stretches its arms and prepares for bed. She wouldn’t want us to have time to fuss over a goodbye. She’d rather we just hung up the phone.  

B.K.’s death was not a surprise, nor was it agonizingly painful. It wasn’t filled with new complications. The woman who had survived a stroke at age 78, quietly passed from earth one month before her 99th birthday.  

Ada Zoske recalled the night – Wednesday, Aug. 19, 1987 – the day B.K.’s last column was filed.  

For several days she had been weakening. Daughters Hazel Radspinner and Ruth Swarens returned to be by her side. The three women stayed with their mother until she finished her final breath. B.K. asked them to sing the Biblical Psalm “The Lord is my shepherd …” She closed her eyes and made no sound.  

Newspapers across the state carried her obituary; the Great Falls Tribune and the Montana Standard paid tribute; and the Missoulian and the Ravalli Republic both wrote stories and editorials.  

“The nation’s oldest working journalist is dead,” led the Ravalli Republic.  

The Missoulian’s story began, “When B.K. Monroe first wrote about the Bitterroot Valley, she was a young widow with six children. She needed a job. The valley had news to tell. A journalist was born.”  

B.K.’s final column ran the day after she died, without explanation. “The Indians Are the Real Winners,” a short piece, read:  

Ravalli County was once a simple valley claimed by the Indians as their own birthright. The Salish and Kootenai tribal nations came each spring to harvest “spetlum,” the bitter earthbound roots of our state’s own delicate pink flower. That plant that the Lewis and Clark explorers named Bitter Root was carried back to the East by naturalist Meriwether Lewis and then given the fine Latin tag, “Lewisa
rediviva" when those gnarled and weathered roots revived in “foreign earth” and bloomed again.

The Indian nations that effected their own claim as to usage of their historic land were within their rights as first owners when “whose land it truly was” had to be considered.

The two Indian nations, confronted by the two explorers, Lewis and Clark on their “long, long trail” were not challenged by any claim against the Indian “birth right.” Their claim was valid and proper “in the sight of God.” The claim was respected by then President Thomas Jefferson. No claim by Jefferson was made actually by his “corps of discovery.”

The Indians came forth as winners. Even without a battle. How come?

Peaceful passage was granted by the two Indian nations. No battle smoke rose in the Bitter Root sky over the arena of peace. Respect and friendship were the words scribed in Lewis and Clark’s journals when these hardy explorers came back home with their truthful reports.

And, when there came white men to the Valley with “homesteading and settlement views,” it was clearly brought out that the Bitter Root Valley Indians had “first rights.” Settlement of land rights were peaceful, friendly and reasonable with dignity and respect on both sides.

Today there are Indian “peace talks” across the Untied (sic) States, as the American Indian tribes of the East question the white government’s authority as to possession of lands taken through trade or swap or at “the point of a smoking gun.” Yet the Bitter Root vale that Lewis and Clark discovered in 1905-1906, has had none of those problems. The respect put forth by those early intrepid explorers and faith-giving “Black Robes” left a legacy of peace for the Valley of the Bitter Roots.

Respect and honor return each year in the annual Indian celebrations at the Mission in just the manner that the roots revive each spring to spread beauty and bounty across the Valley’s hillsides.

The Missoulian published an editorial calling her range of material and insight “astonishing,” her curiosity “unquenchable,” and her attitude upbeat and proud, despite the “hard-scrabble” life she led.

In 1980, B.K. was asked how she might like to be remembered in 25 years.

She answered: “B.K. Monroe, the Bitterroot Valley native who loved its people and the good-neighbor way of life. I just want to be credited with making a worthwhile contribution.”
Her contributions included thousands of columns and stories, millions of published
words and an intangible thing called “inspiration,” which B.K. most unknowingly gave to
dozens of writers and editors who worked with her during her almost 69-year career.

Hadley said her knowledge of history taught him the value in understanding a
community’s culture by its roots.

“She inspired me about her tenacity,” he said. “It’s always really important to me to
see that people as they become older are still impassioned with something. She always
felt like she was a member of the staff and she never let us down.”

And Miles Romney admired her for the way she “got in there and dug in the way she
did,” according to Jelinek.

Wayne Hedman said her role as the community storyteller – not the storytaker – was
inspiring. But most of all, her digging in was admirable and noticed.

“I think that B.K. was tremendously courageous,” he said. “I don’t think she was
intimidated or backed off from any issue. She had journalistic integrity. She had the
presence to know that she would have had the authority of the pen behind her in any
environment she moved in.”

Pat Rhodes, long-time Bitterroot Valley reporter and historian, recalled B.K. attending
journalism school functions at the University of Montana in the 1950s. “She was always
introduced and praised as the leading and longest-termed woman journalist in the state,”
she recalled. “And, she went on for many years after that.”

Rhodes said B.K.’s influence traveled outside her hometown.

“I have run into a number of historians and journalists who, the minute they knew I
was from the Bitterroot Valley, would bring up B.K.’s name,” she said. “She was known
and revered as somewhat of a legend throughout Montana. She broke ground for female
journalists in Montana.”

B.K. found Sacajawea’s travel with Lewis and Clark interesting, and she always
imagined that she stopped and rested in a spot with a perfect view of a jagged rock south
of Hamilton. B.K. wrote:

And history disciples of the Bitter Root still are asking for recognition by the State
of Montana of the ‘Sacajawea Rock’ ten miles south on U.S. 93 from Hamilton. The
great wall of ‘painted rock’ was on the Indian trail that Sacajawea rode when she was
a member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1805 and 1806.
There is still a half-promise the name may be given.

Last July of 2000, during the Kerlee family reunion in the Bitterroot Valley, B.K.’s
long-awaited hope came true. The Bitter Root Historical Society with the support of the
Montana Historical Society purchased the engraving, and the Kerlee family gathered for
its dedication on a hot Saturday afternoon. Today, the rock is also named after B.K. in
honor of her contributions to journalism and history documentation in the valley.

“She was probably the best-respected female reporter,” Gilluly said. “She had a
reputation that spread out of the Bitterroot and extended into the Missoula area. And that
was at a time when small-town newspapers didn’t get out and around and beyond their
own territory very much.”

He and Barrows nominated B.K. to the Montana Newspaper Hall of Fame in the
summer of 2000. Recently, the MNA approved the nomination. And in June of 2001,
B.K. will be inducted into its ranks. Why? Gilluly explained: “For her longevity and the
ability to crank out millions of words of copy and present it in a decent form for people
for their enjoyment and education. This gal deserves it.”
She played a vital role as a correspondent for many Montana publications—sometimes in unanticipated ways. Recently, former Western News printer Gilbert Jelinek wrote a letter to the publisher of the Missoulian. He complained that a recent fancy and colorful weather page located in the back of the paper had been failing to include Hamilton’s daily weather, merely reporting it as unavailable.

In the letter, Jelinek explained how it used to work, back in the days when B.K. tore around the corner of Second Street, carrying that day’s report that she had just received from the local Rocky Mountain Laboratory. “I explained how she used to do it, for at least 40 years,” Jelinek said. And he scolded the newspaper: “How do you operate now? I’ll bet you pay a lot for (the weather page) and it isn’t worth a damn.”

For B.K., she recognized that each weather report was precious to the members of her community, though worth less than a dollar to her.

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3 Ibid.
7 Hadley interview.
8 Jelinek interview.
9 Hedman interview.
10 Email interview with Pat Rhodes, Wednesday, March 28, 2001.
APPENDIX 1

SAMPLES OF B.K. MONROE’S WORK

The following appendix contains samples of B.K.’s published and unpublished later columns and historical pieces. Her writing is arranged chronologically to illuminate her focus and style as she aged.
Pioneer Forest Rangers Hardy, Wife Recalls Days of 1910 in Idaho Wilderness

The Spokesman Review, August 17, 1947

By B.K. Monroe

HAMILTON, Mont. Aug. 16. — The August haze, spread over the Bitterroot and Sapphire ranges like a tent roof, now and then gets a whiff of timber smoke in its summer scent mixture.

From dull blue to gray the sky pattern goes as whimsy of the elements creeps in to change the picture. Then from the 1947 model summer, we who have known pioneering times in the forest service go back over memory trails to compare the lot of the forester with the forester of today. Back, say, to 1910. The other day an old retired ranger said to me:

“您知道，Bess，大部分的森林管理工作现在都是在办公室里完成的，”

He went on to remind me of times when I was the wife of a young forest ranger in north Idaho. As I back-trailed, I thought he must be at least 90 per cent right.

Cayuse and buckboard

Part of our work had been under this old-timer as a head ranger in western Montana and I remember how he toured the woods in a buckboard or by saddle horse where the buckboard was too wide for the trail. And that buckboard with its cayuse team! Boys and girls, you who know the convenience of automobiles and forest service trucks today in your jobs, you’ve missed a lot of you’ve never traveled a woods road in a buckboard. Talk about hitting the high spots, no Ford model that ever was could skim the country like those four-heeled, steel-tired, little two-horse whing-dings of the 1890s and the early 1900s.

I know, because I’ve ridden in them, holding my baby girl tight lest a hidden stump in the rutty road jolt her out of my arms. And I can remember when year or two later, I longed for the comfort of a buckboard to take the place of the saddle horse way of travel that was our only means of going places after we crossed the mountains from Montana to Idaho’s Clearwater forest.

Kept Daily Journal

The rangers I knew then carried their offices along with them in their heads, with maybe a small day book to serve as a journal of their daily occupations, in a hip pocket. When, one day each month the man had to summarize those daily memos into a concrete report, ever mother’s son of them agreed that report day was the hardest in the whole month. But, oh the lore those fellows stored up in those same heads; the ideals for forestry to come, for conservation of the forest, the watershed and the streams that went down the canyons to reach the bigger creeks and eventually the rivers!

Some of those splendid fellows were college-bred. Yale, Cornell, Harvard and other eastern universities had contributed grand men to the study of the actual forest and the easterners joined our western men in winter reconnoissance that meant living in tents on the hard-crusted snow far back toward the Montana line to the east of the Clearwater, through December, January, February and March.
Sheet Iron Stoves
Sheet-iron cookstoves and a Sibley to warm their sleeping tent; fir boughs for the hills' own brand of inner spring mattress, sougans and blankets. Such was the housing and equipment they endured through those long months, with pack trains bringing supplies and mail once a month or so.

I recall so many instances that spoke of sacrifices made by these early foresters. How many young unmarried easterners, pilgrims of the hill trails, reached eagerly for the letters that came from the girls back home, or from mother and dad in a far-away state.

I've seen worn, dirty envelopes with the writing almost gone, what with the contact of wool shirt pockets and maybe the strong beat of hearts under the pockets, doing a perpetual motion act to help the paper and cloth friction; still the treasured letters would be taken out to be read and reread as lonesome evenings came.

As for the summer and its fire season, a lull in firefighting times brought in two or three to the ranger station where we had a garden of sorts. Those men who had lived on beans and bacon and sourdough biscuits, fell upon the rows of lettuce like starved creatures, pulling the leaves apart to wash them at the well, and then to fairly devour the wonderful "green stuff," their first for weeks.

We knew little of the outside world's happenings, for daily papers were out of our reach. An occasional weekly might come in from somebody's hometown, but that was all. The telephone and the grapevine were out-of-this-world facilities; institutions that providence maintained, I thought for limited as they were we could somehow reach needed points of action on the outside.

Plenty of Baking
Firefighters then had to be transported partly by stage and then on horseback from the towns down the valley. One 1911 summer day, my phone brought word that 20 were coming from Orofino to the Musselshell ranger station on their way into the back country where hundreds of acres were afire. I had baked "starter lightbread" that morning, nine loaves in all, but these had to be augmented by baking powder biscuits as the girl who helped me and I prepared a noontime dinner. There was a jolly cook along with the firefighter crew - I think his name was Harry Smith - and his praises were loud when he saw the immense array of food the girl and I had managed to prepare. Part of the crew remained for supper and in the few hours he was with us, that Orofino cook made every move count to help us in supper preparations. That's one thing about a man cook - there's never a lost motion, and it's a joy to watch one in action, especially if he's good natured. And now that man could slice bacon and fry it to just the right crispy brown!

Anyhow, these firefighters had to go by trail; there were no planes with parachutes to slip swiftly through the skies to the exact fire spot; to easy way to control the mountain conflagrations; just dig firelines, fellows and watch that the fire doesn't jump the ridge, will you? Hey, and don't forget to pray for rain.

Lightning Is Tricky
Lightning hits in the darndest places, the rangers always said. And I learned how right they were in such assertions. Crown fires and a hot, dry August wind make combinations of the devil, no less. Or if the bolt from the blue hits a dry snag and goes swift-like to the ground to fire the duff of the forest floor - well there's variety for you.
One early fall I went back with a pack train to where my forester and others were building new trails toward the Montana line. Big Burn, they called the camp spot, for such was its mapped specification. An old burn of maybe 20 acres, the hillside held only black snags and there wasn’t too much in the way of young growth to promise new forest. But there was a singing creek over to the south and even with campfire cookery the only way of preparing our provender, the camp was a good one. Out in the sticks that way, you don’t expect household conveniences and with necessity the ruling power, you just naturally take hold and do all you can.

At least unless you want the menfolks to “cuss” the day that brought a woman into their camp. I was homestead-born and raised, so that the woods life wasn’t entirely a new hardship. Indeed it wasn’t a hardship in the mountain sense of the word, instead it was just another chance to prove you hadn’t forgotten that law that all homesteaders early learned – the law of survival of the fittest. And no one knows the truth of this axiom more than the forest men of those pioneering years.

Make Sourdough Biscuits

You boil beans and make sourdough biscuits and flapjacks or you go hungry. Just here I remember how some of those fellows, for the sake of variety, gathered huckleberries and cooked them in the breakfast oatmeal. And how they blessed me one suppertime when I hacked up some doubtful bacon and boiled it with spuds and onions to make a savory main item for the meal.

I stayed in camp a week, and then with home calling me, set out alone for the trail home. Old Chub, the chestnut sorrel I rode, had at some time been beaten around the head and nothing on earth could make him lead. I just sat in the saddle for all of the thirty miles home and made it by nightfall. Chub used his head without benefit of rein and though I ached from steady riding, he would allow no walking on my part – not unless I elected to walk all the way.

$91 Was Not Enough

After three years of helping Uncle Sam to establish forest trails and boundaries with timber protection and management sandwiched in between the construction jobs, we left the service. Not without regret, for both of us were forest-minded, but chiefly because the $91 which was a ranger’s monthly stipend with which to support his family and keep at least two horses in Uncle’s work, just wasn’t enough money.

But looking backward doesn’t hurt. Instead it brings a satisfaction in having even a small part in a great plan that had to be born of pioneering. And I am glad, as I know other forest ranger’s womanfolk of those early years are glad, that trail hardships and primitive living are not the lot of the average forest wife today. True, there are still a few who like to brave the summer wilds and cook for their men and the crews, but they have every kind of good food, like canned ham and other preserved meat, along with a variety of provender that is dropped from the air by plane, or toted over the mountain roads by truck.
Mule Asserts Himself

And just here I am reminded of an incident at old Musselshell when the pack train was being loaded, horse and mule, for a trip into the back country. One ranger made a habit of having his sourdough pot ready for quick biscuit or flapjack making and that morning he had packed the little granite-iron pail tight-covered, in the allforche – that wooden or rawhide side pouch that swings from either side of the packsaddle – along with other grocery items.

All set and then the mule started to assert himself. High, wide and handsome, he went over the corral, until every item, including the sourdough batter, dotted the ground in the most complete bucking spree I ever saw. Quick like, I soaked a yeast cake and stirred up some more batter, so when the train went out, it carried the necessary bread item along with the rescued grubsteak.

Somehow, I'll never know whether it was the language that blued the air, or a kick in the slats for Mr. Mule, that made him finally so docile. I kept myself indoors so there would be no hindrance as to what was necessary in this bit of trail discipline. Yes, it was a great life.
Sacajawea must have had the kind of woman courage that God bestows on those who as helpmates, go beyond the call of duty and fearlessly take on themselves, responsibility for tasks unseen when pioneering plans are in the making.

She was a noble young Indian woman and her worth as an intermediary and guide was well proved in meetings of Lewis and Clark with her own people, the Shoshones, as well as other Indian nations of the west.

In the spring the expedition moved from the Mandan country across the wide area that is now our Montana, to halt at the place where three rivers merged to form the Great Missouri. These were the Madison, the Jefferson and the Gallatin rivers and fittingly, the new camp of the explorers was called Three Forks, the name now that of the town that came into the picture years afterward.

The trail across Montana was like unto that of Tipperary – a long way to go, but they went, these intrepid captains and their company, like the good soldiers and pioneers they were. It was in the summertime that they reached the Beaverhead Valley, pitching camp in the shadow of the great rock that gave it the name. From there the party moved into the Lemhi hills of Idaho and there began the story of the lost trail.

Captain Lewis and Captain Clark scouted the Salmon River country for a trail that would take them directly westward to the Pacific. The Shoshone guide made errors of judgment, however and instead of the party heading for the Nez Perce, the journey from the Salmon led over rugged mountains ridges, to lead the expedition down the north side into the Bitterroot. First stop was at a little dale on Camp Creek, the evening of September 4, 1805. Captain Clark wrote of this venture – “We ascended a mountain and took a dividing ridge which we kept for several miles, and fell on the head of a creek which appeared to run the course we wished to go; pursued our course down the creek to the forks;” from that camp they moved the next day, continuing down Camp Creek until they reached the Salish camp at the juncture of the Bitterroot River’s East Fork and Cameron Creek at the edge of the Ross Hole Basin.

So it came to pass that it was in the afternoon of September 5, 1805 when the wayfaring white explorers reached their first Bitterroot point of visitation. Chief Three Eagles and his braves, cautious when they learned of the strangers who were approaching their camp, kept their ways of peace however, and Clark wrote – “We met a party of Tushepah Indians and they received us friendly.”

Captain Lewis also wrote of this meeting – “In the wide valley we discovered a large camp of Indians. When we reached them we were received with great cordiality.”

The white men and the queer black-faced one presented a strange picture as they moved toward the Salish camp. The Indians stood as if spellbound. But when the two tall leaders dismounted and smiled, holding out friendly hands, Chief Three Eagles and his braves greeted them as brothers. The chief called for his best buffalo hides, those that had been made into robes, the Indians’ only “blankets,” and he presented these to the visitors.

As the people Lewis called the “The friendly Ootlashoots” watched, they gained a new knowledge of still another race, that of the Negro; the captains were the first white men these Salish had ever seen and both Lewis and Clark pushed up their sleeves to show that
despite the heavy tan of their faces, they were white-skinned; the wonder of the black servant of Captain Clark continued for the Indians and some of them moved forward to touch his cheeks with experimental fingers and finally in all friendliness to try stroking his kinky hair into a semblance of their own straight black braids. The black man’s name was “York” and he met these Indian hosts with a grin that was altogether friendly; when they tested his skin for fast color, they found their fingers had not brought away any black. How strange the Great Spirit should send such a contrast of race, the white and the black into the camp of the Red Man!

Lewis said, “A council was immediately assembled, white robes were thrown over our shoulders and the Pipe of Peace was introduced. After this ceremony it was too late to go any further and we camped and continued smoking and conversing with the chiefs until a late hour. There were 33 lodges and about 400 souls of whom 80 were men. They were kind and friendly and wished to share with us their only provisions, which were berries and roots. Their only wealth was their horses of which they had about 500.

“We assembled the chiefs and warriors and informed them who we were and the purpose for which we visited them. This was conveyed in many different languages. We received in return a small quantity of tobacco and a medal to each, a present from the principal chief (Three Eagles) which were skins of otter and antelope.”

It was Sacajawea’s task to interpret for Captain Lewis his greetings to Chief Three Eagles. She told them for him – “We have come to your camp, our Ootlashoot friends. We come from the camp of Shoshones. We have had many hardships and I will tell you of a lost trail. Our Shoshone guide intended to fetch our expedition over this range of mountains father west and strike the western fork of Clark’s River, called the Nez Perce fork. But our guide lost his way September 3rd and the creek we camped on was not the creek our guide wished to camp on. But he did not let us be completely lost. Instead of crossing the range to the west, we are here after a wrong trail. We suffered much and we have lost two of our horses. We wish to buy horses. We will be your friends forever, as shines the sun to the eastward.”

Always in our America, the friendly pipe has been a symbol – something that men could understand as a medium for exchange of regard and to calm the thinking. It was in this spirit that the explorers offered their tobacco to their new friends, the Salish. There was sputtering and there was puckering of the mouth for the Indians who had never before tasted such “big smoke.” Their own kinnikinick was better. Seeing their trouble with his tobacco, Lewis asked for some kinnikinick and mixed it with the tobacco. Modified the white man’s smoke was accepted and the Peace Pipes filled. And thus was friendship sealed, a friendship between Red Man and White that still endures.

That night’s campfire became a sacred flame, its light shining into the hearts of men until color of skin became something that did not matter too much. And after the Peace Pipe and the parley as to horses had ended, the white men, needing rest, moved toward their own camp. They left the buffalo robes of their horses however, preferring their own homespun blankets that had no part in Indian life. These Indians wore only the clothing they had fashioned from the skins of the deer and the other wild things.

On the morning of September 6th the Ootlashoots broke camp bidding their new white friends and the black servant to come along, but this the explorers declined to do. They folded their tents however, and took their way north even as the Indians had done, following the East Fork with its natural trail, down into the heart of the Bitterroot Valley.
They camped on Sleeping Child Creek, near the present site of Grantsdale, moving over the valley floor that was to be the site of Hamilton, and to the locality of the east side, where their diaries tell of “Scattering Creek” as a camping spot. This name was attributed by historians to the present Burnt Fork with its branches, east of Stevensville.

Eventually the explorers were at the end of their Bitterroot trek, and here they made camp which they called “Travelers’ Rest,” the Lolo point from which they headed west. Travelers’ Rest became a pivotal point, for it was again their mecca in 1806 when Lewis and Clark returned from their adventures to the Pacific. In that last year of their Montana travels, the two separated at Travelers’ Rest, Clark to go again to Three Forks, and Lewis to wind his way toward the Marias River, until they should meet again to leave the Montana area for the return to the Mandan Nation, which they had left in another year.

Today we know the formal paved highway, U.S. 93, as a modern ribbon of travel running its length from one state to another. Down the mountain of Lewis and Clark’s “Lost Trail” it comes with swiftness of engineering for our convenience and our joy. They had no signposts, no way of knowing which way to go, except that of their crude maps and the natural instinct of their Indian guides. And their Lost Trail finally brought them into a country they had not yet planned to see – the Bitterroot, at that time a claim staked by Canada. Their lost trail was our great gain, however, for had it not been for the route Lewis and Clark took by mistake, the Canadian flag might have been floating over our valley town today, instead of our own great Stars and Stripes. Surely the Lewis and Clark Lost Trail was not all lost.

As to names, our Montana has several geographical titles that were bestowed by Lewis and Clark, Lewis in particular. They called the Jefferson River after their president, the Madison was named for James Madison, statesman of the Jefferson era and later a president. The Gallatin was so named in honor of Jefferson’s secretary of treasury, Albert Gallatin. Each of these names has been given to the counties that were later formed.

Lewis is credited with naming the bitterroot flower, which the Indians knew as source of root food. While his 1805 visit was too late for the blossoming, he was made familiar with the roots and he carried some of them home with him to plant. His exclamation – “Rediviva” when he found the roots coming to life in his eastern home, was to become a part of the botanical name of the bitterroot, Lewisia Rediviva, in honor of the explorer. He named the mountain range and the river for the little flower that in after years became Montana’s choice as a state emblem. Captain Lewis was as much a botanist as an explorer and he gave to history many facts as to the flora and fauna of our valley. The river he had first called “Clark’s Fork” in honor of his friend, became known too by the Bitterroot name.
"Stream Was Navigable in Early Days:
Logging Activity, River Runs Date Back to 1880s in Valley"
Ravalli Republican, December 1, 1967
By B.K. Monroe

(Editor's note: In connection with a possible court determination on the navigability of the Bitter Root River, the Republican and Ravalli County Fish, Wildlife Assn. asked B.K. Monroe to document early day logging and commercial activity on the river. The following account tells of the wild river log runs and other subsequent activity on the Bitter Root and tributary streams. It also serves as an excellent history of early logging activity in the valley.)

The Bitter Root River is a contrary waterway in one respect. It flows not toward the south and on to the Gulf of Mexico. Instead this turbulent, but navigable, mountain-born river heads for the north. Its waters reach the Pacific Ocean eventually by way of the Clark’s Fork and then into the great Columbia River. Most of my seventy-nine years have been lived in this north-bound river’s beautiful valley. I was born on a homestead that had a border along Tincup Creek, one of the tributaries of this rugged Bitter Root that is more than one hundred miles long.

... When Lewis and Clark moved into the Bitter Root back in August of 1805, they had only an Indian trail, one that had not been marked as part of their route. They traveled along the North Fork of the Salmon River after losing their way from Lemhi Pass into Idaho, and that is how they chanced into the Bitter Root.

... And there that Sacajawea, the little sister of the chief, and interpreter and guide for Lewis and Clark ever since they departed from the Mandan Indian Nation in the Dakotas, persuaded her brother to guide the white explorers to the Columbia.

Traveling down the trails, the explorers learned from the Indians that the Bitter Root river was navigable, but they kept on the valley floor, on north to the Travelers Rest near Lolo. From there they went through Lolo Pass to the Columbia.

As to navigation on the Bitter Root River, first commercial use for its northerly route was after the logging industry reached the timbered sectors of the valley. Up in the south valley, logging had started in the 1880s on a fairly large scale, with the Harpers taking over the woods along the Tincup Creek route and the Kendalls operating farther east on branches of the Tincup.

Their crews logged the hills all winter and then – come high water time in May and June – the logs were hauled to vantage landings on the river, ready for the annual drive to the “Big Mill” that Marcus Daly built in the late 1880 decade after he had acquired smaller mills from venturing homesteaders.

One of these mills was just west of Hamilton, run by Ben Kress and partner. This mill was the nucleus of the “Big Mill” that Daly had going by the 1890 early years. A mill with a payroll that was mainstay for the town of Hamilton that Daly founded in 1890, his town that was to serve his lumbering interests and his great stock farm of 22,000 acres on the east side of the area that is now the Hamilton community.

High water was an essential for power to run the spring drive of logs down the river, just as four-horse teams were needed to haul the logs from the hills down to landings where they were decked and then rolled into the river.
In winter the logging sleds were conveyance and as the snows left the hills, heavy trucks drawn by the teams served for transportation. So it was manpower, horse power and water power that came into the logging picture.

First it had to be able sawyers, know-row teamsters and then the daredevil “river pigs” — the men with their trusty peaveys to move the logs on the water. The peavey had a stout lever like the canthook of the woods, but its long shaft had a spike on the business end and the peavey went into constant action from the time its handler stepped with his calked boots onto the first log.

Sometimes a river man would slip and go into the river, but usually he was adept and would be back on a log, drippin’ wet, but still in the business of getting logs down the river.

Often as children we would hear our father, who was a Sawyer and teamster too in winter, talk about the “river hogs,” but it was always with respect for their daring. Man power had to cope with water power in a teamwork job.

Lewis Downing who was born on a homestead in the Sawtooth woods, remembers the logging that went on in that area. He remembers logs went into the creek sometimes and were driven down to the river and into Daly’s millpond, there to be fed into the “Big Mill.” Even that would have been a long haul with teams and trucks to get the logs out of the hills.

Another oldtimer in her 90s, Mrs. A.C. Walbridge of Hamilton, recalls her brother, Polk Jennings, as a logging operator of the East Fork. She came with their parents in 1895 to join him here. The East Fork was navigable in the lower areas, too. When Daly’s Hamilton mill became the property of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, a new superintendent, J.E. Totman, came into the Hamilton industry. That was in 1899 and he brought with him new ideas about transporting logs.

So eventually branches of Northern Pacific Railroad were extended from Grantsdale south to Darby and from there spurs of track went directly west into the woods and flatcars took the job that the brave river men had carried on for more than a decade.

There was always drama in the lumbering industry of those somewhat primitive times. And there was always the practical business of feeding these timber workers, no matter what their job. At the camps it would the cookhouse where a cook like Bert Townsend and his “flunkeys” served the best of provender direct from the cookstove to the tables.

What about the men on the drive? Well, sir. Bert Townsend, a Canadian brought into the valley by the Harpers, would have men load his cookstove and kitchen things into the back of a big logging truck and a team would follow the river. Dinnertime found the peaveys dropped or stuck in a log by the riverbank.

And Bert who would have been roasting beef and cooking spuds and beans and — baking his “light bread” loaves through the drive from camp down the river — would watch them eat “like as if they’d never eat before” he told me long ago about feeding working men on the run.

Years since the drive have brought back desire on the part of young active Bitter Root men to prove that the Bitter Root is still a navigable river, one that can get boats and canoes and other watercraft along in much the same way the logs catapulted down to a given point.

And they have kept tradition alive each June now for several years, tradition that gives the river of their home valley its due. It’s a rugged river that “just keeps rollin’ along.”
“Trip to Dillon for Bessie:
Big Hole Still Wide, Handsome”
Ravalli Republican, October 5, 1966
By B.K. Monroe

The Big Hole Highway from its juncture with U.S. 93 on Lost Trail Pass to Wisdom, Jackson and Dillon has only one stretch, about ten miles, that still awaits oiling. But the well-surfaced road makes for good traveling and the old rough wagon road of early times is a thing of the past.

The Big Hole basin with its thousands of haystacks, some baled but the most of it in old-fashioned stacks, presented a good harvest picture to a group of Bitter Root valley residents who made the trip to Dillon over the weekend.

The Big Hole and Grasshopper valleys that are traversed before the motorists reach the Beaverhead valley are “Old Montana” with skylines that are “high, wide and handsome.” Old stake and rider fences – and now and then plain old snake rail fences – connected somehow with barbed wire on posts that are border lines for the big fields. Herds of beef cattle show that the Big Hole can take care of its hay right there at home.

And, although streams run scanty use now, there is no look of drought in the country. In all the towns there had been a fair tourist trade the past summer, but by October there were only a few out-of-state cars to be seen along the roads. The Big Hole, the Grasshopper and the Beaverhead people are part of the old west in their apparent satisfaction as to the cattle country’s way of life.

I was reminded of Gov. Tim Babcock’s bit of comment on the beef cattle industry when he was in the Bitter Root at fairtime in early September.

“The beef industry,” he said, “is the best example of free enterprise we have left. There is no federal interference in the livestock order of business.”

The big, wide country of the Big Hole basin and its neighboring valleys seems to be replete with modern homes and there is contrast to stout cabins with sod roofs that are still giving some kind of service on the ranches.

The first cattle ranchers put up homes that would last out the years of snow and rain, sun and wind that make up the Big Hole country’s climate.

And horses now, we saw riders of all ages along our route in the weekend trip. Palominos and appaloosas grazed along with dapple grays, bays and blacks to show a lot of consideration as to good horses. They made a wholesome picture of cow country everyday living.

At Jackson our ride home stopped long enough for a visit with the Bruce Jardine family and a look at their mink farm where nearly 2,000 ranch mink are a rather new “livestock enterprise” for Jardine, who left the cattle business to others of the oldtime Jardine family to raise the fur-bearing animals. Jet black and pearl white mink really look like prosperity as one walks through the big Jardine pens.

In Dillon there were a good many interesting things to fit into the two days. Visits with oldtime friends, church and on Saturday a meeting of the Montana Chapter of Daughters of American Colonists.

History of Montana was a principal topic and the chapter adopted a resolution favoring state history as a curriculum. One member was Mrs. Florence Nicol Johnson, native of the Bitter Root.
Mrs. Lenore Thompson McCallum, a former Darby teacher, was one of the old time friends who greeted us at her home in Dillon.

The trip was made as a guest of Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Anderson of Victor who motored to Dillon for a visit with relatives and neighbors of their old residence there before coming to the Bitter Root. Their schoolgirl daughter Edith was fourth member of the Dillon tour.

In the Beaverhead County town I was a guest in the home of cousins, Mr. and Mrs. Hans Christian Anderson.

A coincidence of the trip was finding John Wilkerson, son of Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Wilkerson of Darby, this year had succeeded to the teaching post in Dillon vacated this year by the retirement of Mrs. McCallum, who in her Darby years had his parents as pupils.
What has become of the glorious Fourth, the all-American time for celebration of our national independence? Where is the kind of observance that wore all the symbols of patriotism that came from way back in 1776?

Remembering cannot reach that far for today’s younger Americans, of course, but there are still a good many of us who can bring back memories of even the 1890 to 1910 era, when it seemed that properly honoring the Fourth of July was almost a solemn obligation.

The Bitter Root valley’s early settlers were loyal, law-abiding folks in the main and they brought from the Midwest and other sections of the United States, oldtime customs. Chief in the line of community respect for country were the dates of May 30 and July 4. Along in June neighbors would be asking one another - “Where are you goin’ the Fourth?” The women and girls, one and all, planned a “Fourth of July Dress.” These were usually frilled white linen for the girls and pretty flowered cotton for the mothers. The men and boys wore their Sunday suits with white shirts and four-in-hand ties. As to where everybody was going from the Darby community, well, that was usually Lake Como.

There was a village of Bill Sollender origin, a dance pavilion that extended out over the north edge of the lake. There was a kitchen and other utility arrangement known as Sollender’s hotel, where Bill and his wife, Aunt Jennie offered hospitality to all who did not bring along their own picnic dinners.

There would be fiddle and organ music for quadrilles and waltzes in the pavilion, after the crowing even, the Fourth of July program - orations and singing of such familiar airs as “Columbia the Gem of the Ocean” and “America,” and about the tie of that first Cuban conflict when I was nearly 12 years old, my mother coaxed me “to try and make that war story fit the tune of “Marching Through Georgia.”

This was changed to “While we Were Sailing to Cuba” and now I know it must have been a childish offering indeed, but my two younger sisters, Rose and Floss and I gave a Kerlee trio rendition with Floss playing the accompaniment on a simply two-keyed accordian. It was all by ear, of course, but how the people clapped and praised. There were no critics then, just wholesome acceptance by all. And we lived through it.

The orator that I remembered best was Aaron Conner, a good Republican if there ever was one, and how he inspired us in his plea for patriotism in all hearts. He did not make political speeches on the Fourth. Good Americanism dominated his oratory and the pine groves around Lake Como echoed the hearty hand-clapping that was the applause of Aaron Conner’s neighbors. He was the first Ravalli County legislator after 1893. The tablecloths brought from home were spread on the grass of the lakeshore and scores of picnickers joined in feasting. Lemonade and ice cream, both homemade, were treats, fried chicken along with other home-cooked viands made everybody happy. Naturally a keg or two of beer was on hand at Sollender’s place, but nobody ever seemed to imbibe too much. Darby in later years put on Fourth of July celebrations.
By 1906 Lake Como’s planned project of change from a pleasure spot to a utility regime that converted the natural lake to a reservoir had too many obstacles in the way of travel during canal construction.

So the old days with rowboats and Frank Overturf’s big steamboat playing the lake on the celebration days were gone forever, it seemed.

Now of course there are motorboats and in the 1930s a cabin boat, motor-powered, was Dr. Herbert Hayward’s dare to Lake Como navigation. Summer lodges made their appearance on the lake shore, too.

Fourth of July celebrations passed out of the picture and with them seemed to go that old respect by communities for wholehearted Fourth of July celebrations. I am sure there is still a lot of oldtime respect for Independence Day and the patriotism it brought forth but no one is speaking out very often in that old 1890-1900 way, inspiring the neighbors to celebrate the Fourth of July “like we used to.”

The wagons and buggies have long ago given way to motor and air transportation in the Bitter Root and long weekend trips to other places “just to get away from home town scenes” seem to have routed completely the old community-inspired patriotic honors that gave an aura to the Fourth of July.

This last paragraph of Bitter Root lore is to remind valley people that July Fourth, 1899, saw a simple ceremony of dedication in the yard of a new log cabin, dirt-roofed and without floor boards, at Alta in the West Fork.

That cabin was the first ranger station to be built in the United States after establishment of the National Forest Service. The rangers who built it were N.E. “Than” Wilkerson and H.C. “Hank” Tuttle and they paid for a flag out of their own pockets. They sent the red, white and blue afloat in the West Fork skies in a traditional show of honor to God and country.
February is a month of heritage for all the nations who observe St. Valentine’s Day. Back in the centuries when men became martyrs because they valued ideals above life, this date now defined as a time of “hearts and flowers” was a day of life ended for two such persons.

One was a Roman priest and the other a bishop. Both bore the name of Valentine and so February 14 was thereafter remembered as St. Valentine’s Day.

There must have been romance involved in the sacrifice of the two lives to keep a halo of love and sweetheart communication such as the Valentine’s Day that we observe.

Children in kindergartens and primary grades of the elementary schools are no doubt making pretty red and white heart-shaped paper valentines under teacher’s careful instruction to take home to mothers or to shyly pass to little girls and boys with the message, “Be my Valentine” penciled thereon.

I remember how the community of Darby would celebrate Valentine’s Day with an evening social of feasting and dancing.

They styled the even as a “basket social” and it was truly a time of hearts and flowers. Of course the general store had pretty custom-made Valentine favors for mailing but as to the baskets, each was a home creation. My older sisters turned out very pretty baskets.

For a nominal cost tissue paper of various colors could be had at the store and pasteboard boxes would be covered well and decked with paper roses.

The roses were entirely hand-fashioned. Strips of red or pink tissue would be folded four or five times and one scalloping operation of scissors would produce the needed petal effect.

Then the scalloped strips would really get into the flower act. Wire stems were fastened to the paper and the strips were would into shape. Green paper covered the stem wires nicely and green leaves, cut in good imitation of foliage would complete the ensemble.

The paper roses were truly works of art and were very good imitations of the red or pink roses that blossomed on the bushes in summertime.

Festooned on the baskets, the roses played a big part in attracting the young men at the social, when one by one the baskets, each containing a supper for two, were auctioned to the highest bidder.

Often the prettier ones took the bidding to a final $4 or $5, quite a sum in those days of $2-a-day wages.

And the Valentine basket social was never a failure, for proceeds of the auction usually went to the community Sunday school that would meet in the same hall on Sunday after the basket social of Saturday night.

Flowers in winter are more easily procured now than they were a half-century ago, thanks to flower ships. But along with hothouse roses and other blossoms today, a line of artificial blossoms, any kind almost, is offered too.
Many are near perfect as to copy of natural flowers. Still I hold my own opinion that the hand-fashioned roses my sisters made were the best as to imitation, perhaps because precision of pattern was left out.

They would curl the rose petals with a scissor blade, deftly, and shape the rose that even old Mother Nature might approve.

But in deference to Decoration Day, only the flowers of gardens and the wild blossoms gathered from the woods found their way to the graves the early Bitter Rooters honored.

May 30 is usually a time of seasonal blossoming everywhere and undoubtedly that is the reason it was named so long ago as Decoration Day, now known generally as Memorial Day.
“Business Has Always Been Hub Of Interest In Community: 
Bessie Recalls Many Main St. Changes Through 50 Years”
Ravalli Republic, January 25, 1974
By B.K. Monroe

Where is the Main Street of Hamilton’s yesteryears, the half-century-ago avenue of trades, mercantile buildings, hotels, cigar stores, professional offices and other once-time important commercial lines?

When I came to Hamilton in 1922 to take a news job, Main Street was like this, starting from “Front Street” on the east edge.

First was the tall, sprawling old Northern Pacific depot with veteran S.R. (Sam) Wilson as agent – his family living in the quarters in the second story.

The street’s south side gave a pleasing picture as to civic pride. There was the gray concrete Chamber of Commerce with lawn and shade trees, and across on the north side was the pretty little city park with its fountain, trout pool and beds of flowers that caretaker David Bishop tended all summer long.

He added that job to his work in maintaining the Tourist Park east of Main Street. There a handsome bungalow and a few cabins welcomed transient guests for a few years, beginning in orchard boom times and finally closed as a municipal facility. (There was a small lake and an island that Dave Bishop made beautiful with blossoming plants. Dahlias were his specialty.)

There was no U.S. Highway 93 then. Going back to the south side, one crossed Front Street to the Hamilton Hotel, successor to the H.S. Page hotel business that had its start at Riverside; it was moved to Marcus Daly’s new Hamilton in the first decade of the town.

The hotel was complete with bar and dining room and J.O. Read was, as I remember, the proprietor. He had been operator of the Ravalli Hotel in its time and until it was destroyed by fire.

Read was a ranch owner, too, and when the Skalkaho Road was in process of construction, took me in his Model-T Ford to see some of the construction. He was one of the foremost boosters then.

Others to manage the hotel in the years included Nels Knutson and Tom Sorenson. Across Main Street, the European Hotel block is still a sturdy brick structure. Louis Peterson, father of Arthur Peterson, was owner. It always seemed to be just a quiet rooming house, mainly for men who made their homes within.

Of course, the old Hamilton three-story hotel is no more. Each year after the motel era began, more and more competition of ground floor accommodation came along. Eventually the last proprietor, Mrs. Bethel Acuff and her family closed a business deal that a new owner found non-profitable for the aging hostelry.

The building stood – an empty reminder of early times – until it was demolished to make room for a Main Street service station.

On west from the Hamilton Hotel there were different business places like the Emporium, a dry goods and ready-to-wear shop. Mr. and Mrs. William Westgreen were owners.

Later it was acquired by George F. Boldt and his wife Viola, parents of Federal Judge George H. Boldt of Seattle. A graduate of the University law school at Missoula, Judge
Boldt still returns to the valley where he grew up. His wife, Eloise was a member of the Tom Baird family of early logging times.

C.J. Carlstrom and W.P. O’Brien were figures in the Hotel block a men’s card room, and in the upstairs O’Brien hotel, where old-time hospitality was maintained by Mrs. O’Brien, a kindly woman always.

O’Brien, a native of “The Ould Sod” had an Irish flag that he always floated from their upstairs window above Main Street on St. Patrick’s Day.

The Carlstrom family home in north Hamilton was another hospitable old-time residence. There was the Model Café operated by a succession of Japanese families and next to it the Downing Drug. When the First National Bank closed, the drug store moved there and so is the corner landmark of Main and South Second.

The Bitterroot Stock Farm, the Hamilton offices of the Telephone and the Western Union Telegraph were all in the block leading south from Main. The present Stock Farm office was occupied by the C.S. Kendall drug business for years until the Kendalls retired and went to the west coast.

Mrs. Kendall had a gift corner in the drug store and Kendall was somewhat famous for his special “homemade ice cream.” The soda fountain was a part of drug store business then and the Roberts Book Store too.

Gradually these “ice cream parlors” faded out of the Hamilton picture and something old and dear to young hearts was lost.

Wells Creamery, a later business in the Second Street area, added an ice cream business that school-age folks especially appreciated because one could get an overload cone for a nickel. W.C. Wells was the owner.

As to drug store moves, Claud Maxwell, a pharmacist who served in all the Hamilton stores at times, took over the Kendall business. It was moved to H.J. St. John, who moved his Stevensville drug business here. It is still the St. John store operated by his sons Max and Leo.

It is hard to leave Second Street in this recollection summary, for it was a business center by itself.

The First National Bank with E.T. Kaster as president was an imposing corner business for years. The wane of the orchard boom closed three banks in the Bitterroot in a short span of years. These were state banks at Darby and Corvallis and the First National. The Victor Bank, from the start a Groff stronghold, held on, as did the First State at Stevensville, along with the Citizens State and the Ravalli County Banks here.

But the depression after World War I had threats for all four. I remember a pencil-notebook trip after one, in apparent authority, told me the two Hamilton banks just might consolidate, but I should ask “Bob” O’Hara about it.

I hotfooted straight to the O’Hara office with this vital question. The O’Hara answer was short and final. He looked kindly at me and said, “Hell Bessie, you can’t put two bad eggs together and make one good one.” Logic.

Those precarious financial times are long past and surely the published bank statements of the four firms in 1974 dispel any worry as to their standing. They are all “good eggs.”

The Bitterroot Stock Farm office, with C.A. Crawford as manager and Laura B. Jones as secretary, was a landmark as center of all the Daly interest in this valley. The Valley Mercantile department store had succeeded the first A.C.M. establishment. Some of the
figures I remember in the “Valley Merc” included a manager, G.N. Walden, department heads A.F. Chapdelain, Carrie Hork, upstairs ready-to-wear; George Leichner and John Gravelle, grocery.

I remember Minnie See and Helen Hickey distinctly as saleswoman in the dry goods department. And there was George Cole, never to be forgotten as custodian, who could talk unendingly about first years in Hamilton.

W.A. Bower came along as manager and later bought the Valley Merc outright from Daly interests. A few years and fire leveled the big store. In its place came the Bower Block.

Theater business in Hamilton began with Daly’s classy Lucas Opera House, above the First National Bank. It was named by Daly for one of his foremen, Sam Lucas.

The summer of 1907 I worked in Hamilton, and with friends, attended a couple of road shows in “the opera house” as it was still known. I was impressed by the tiered seats and the “real stage,” since in all my 18 years I had only known the town hall in Darby as place where home talent shows took place.

By 1922 I found the olden theater was no longer an opera house. Under new owners it became the Ravalli Theater. The commodious stage had a gem of a curtain that sported a painted scene of the valley south of town, that spot where the then county road wended between the Bitterroot River and a wide irrigation canal. (I hope that curtain was not lost in the change from theater to roller skating rink.)

Until the present Hamilton High School was completed in 1931, it was the Ravalli Theater that was scene of high school commencements and plays, in 1931 the graduation classes still were in what since became Jefferson elementary school, but the new high school was readied for the commencement exercises.

North Second Street still flaunts an ancient brick wall sign, “F.L. BURNS.”

Frank Burns’ story began with Hamilton when he was first to buy a lot or two on Main Street for his jewelry store. Dave Bishop too, was one of the first buyers for a business. Burns Hall above the jewelry store was for generations the place for public dances and social events.

The Burns home on South Fourth is now an annex of an apartment house, that by the way, was the first in Hamilton. It was called the “Ladd Flats.” Brank Burns in his later years was mayor of Hamilton.

And that brings to mind that staunch old-timer, “Bob” O’Hara who was the first mayor of Hamilton after its incorporation.

Writing as names and early town businesses come to mind, I know that the Chinese tradesmen had figured in the business life of Hamilton almost from its beginning.

When my first year of news gathering saw old buildings on the north side being razed to make way for new construction, there was a bit of excitement when a North Second place, a one-time Chinese laundry, gave with what appeared to be a skeleton hand and forearm. The bones were very old and there were many wrong guesses as to possibility that they were human.

The doctors finally discredited this notion. The story was that Chinese people had a lot of faith in bear oil and even the meat as health helps. The 50-years-ago “find” of news hawks was given no more attention.
Mountain folks too, came up with knowledge that the forefeet of a bear resembled the human hand in bone structure and for that matter the hind feet had the same resemblance to the human foot. Bear tracks that I have seen tend to look like those of a barefoot kid. We had to give up on that trail that to a novice might have revealed murder, "way back there."

The Montana Café with its succession of family sons and nephews of the long-time operators, Lee Suey and Lee Poy, was for years in the Burns building's street section, but later had a new site, the present. The second generation of Lees formally changed to the surname, Horn, which was their original family name.

Lee Suey was master of the Montana dining room and his brother, Lee Soy, was main cook. Now it is Harry and May out front, with Jim and Kim the chef detail.

Japanese families were restaurant keepers on the south side of Main Street before World War II in just about the same location as the present Range Café. Old-style hotels like the Hamilton – and the palatial Ravalli of 1895 – always maintained formal dining rooms.

There was an early-day small place called the Cottage Hotel on North Second, that I recall was founded by a Freeman family. About 1902, I remember being a guest of the A.W. Newell family briefly while attending a Sunday School convention at the Baptist Church, now Faith Lutheran Church.

The word Baptist takes me back again to 1922 when the Bitterroot Steam Laundry, when Lazim died. His home was the residence first built by his parents who came in “Big Mill” times – about two blocks west of the store.

Second-hand stores thrived in Hamilton and best-known competitors through 40-years or so were the firm Kleinodor & Hobbs on Main Street and E.E. Smith on North Second, good tradesmen and good citizens all. Smith was grandfather of Ellsworth Smith of the Barron Jewelry whose founder was John G. Barron, maternal grandfather of Ellsworth.

Grocery stores and hardy owners played a big part in the life story of Hamilton. There was H.H. (Harry) Spaulding who first came from Ohio as a teacher, married a Hamilton girl and established a store in the Odd Fellows building on North Second. Later he moved to Main in what is now a part of the Republic’s location. Spaulding was a grocer for 40 years or more.

The Stanton Grocery operated by H.T. Stanton and following his death by son Charles, like the Spaulding store, closed in fairly recent times. There was the Town Grocery too in the west compartment that later became a part of the Roberts Book store. Merrit Town and his wife, Orpha, who had homesteaded in the Flathead Valley early in the century, founded and operated the business.

Somewhere in the interim Tom Skelton and Bob Nicol figured as grocery men. With the Valley Merc’s grocery department throughout those years there was plenty of competition.

Before the days of the Elks temple and the Legion hall, the Masonic Temple dining hall and the Pythian hall above the Sid Wheeler meat market, served as banquet halls many years.

The meat market was run by Sid Wheeler and E. Schragl for many years.

Wheeler was a partner too with Al Naylor in a hardware and plumbing business, later the Sanderson Hardware minus the plumbing E.L. Sanderson retired several years ago and with his wife, Bessie, lives at Palm Springs, Calif.
In my years as a news hawk I have reported the coming of chain stores to Hamilton. I remember too, many times, when small ventures were in the line of mercantile years, like the Vincent-Renn ready-to-wear that eventually became Irene's; a china-painting and needlecraft shop by Alice Renn before the Vincent-Renn venture and a dozen others are only faint recollections, but there were good people connected with them all.

Perhaps real estate offices saw more changes than most businesses in Hamilton, but A.L. Johnston held out many years on South Second. The Coulter Block was owned by his brother-in-law Clyde Coulter, who in his time was a justice of the peace for this township.

Newspapers: Way back in the 19th century there were the Bitterroot Times and Bitterroot Bugle published at Grantsdale. Later the Ravalli County Democrat and Ravalli County Republican were published here. ...

Lately the old Lagerquist mill property, long idle, figured in a change of owners. Another idle lumber plant is the Taber Mill. J.O. Lagerquist founded his mill in early times of the town, sons carried on for a few years after his death.

Plumbing firms changed home scenes after the 1890 years and a staunch Canadian migrating with his family to Hamilton was W.J. Fullerton I. His sons and grandsons kept the Fullerton venture up to standard at present times.

There was the family group of Petersons, early 1900 comers from a Scandinavian homeland.

Livery stables, hotel, paperhangers and painters, good figures always in Hamilton industry and business. There were the brothers, Swan, Louis, John and Olaf. Sons still keep the Peterson name on the go in business and professions.

Shops that helped folks keep comfortable in their "old shoes" bring to mind Dan Kimsey, a World War I veteran of the Lost Battalion of the Argonne. In the late 1920s he operated a shoe shop that later was owned by Howard Sanford.

I recall, too, a harness shop owned by Will Hayes of the old-time Hayes family. A sister, Edith Welch, still lives here, a resident at Valley View Estates.

An old-timer called from another town Tuesday to ask me, "Do you remember when Hamilton had a woman doctor?"

Yes, I remember. Dr. Lillian G. Miller, an independent type, always attired in tailored suit left Hamilton in the 1920s after a few years of general medical practice.

Most of the medical and surgical men of Hamilton's earlier years have been named in a recent story of hospital history here. There was Dr. R.A. Stark, osteopath of many years here, and Dr. Leonard Budden, chiropractor, both good civic-minded members of Hamilton's professional world.

For back in the years when Grantsdale had the edge of the brand, new town of Hamilton, Dr. T.B. Owings with headquarters at Grantsdale had a general medical and surgical practice for all the area. He was an uncle of Herb Owings and a charter member of Hamilton's Masonic Lodge.

One business member of the 1920-30 era was The Golden Rule ready-to-wear where the Ben Franklin is now. R.L. Cresap was its merchant. Later the Variety Store was founded there by C.E. Boren and his daughter and son-in-law Ruth and Jim Potts.

The Roberts Book Store in 1908, as I originally saw it, was in the present Republic block. It was managed by Mrs. W.H. Roberts and her son Lloyd after the death of Wynn...
Roberts, the founder. Fred and Pat Roberts were owners until their retirement. The name hasn’t changed entirely. It is now “Robbins Book Store.”

Lines of business and their changes or terminals could go on and on. These pages have been written from memory.

There was so much to town wood merchants had competition from ranch owners who hauled cordwood into the residence sections through the years. Price as I recall paying for range and heating stove was anywhere between $5 and $8 per cord. Chunks and slab cuts had to be chopped to cook stove size by the buyer.

I recall one of the most dependable fuel dealers was Lawrence Wanderell I. Sometimes I would find a small pile of coal dumped in my back yard.

“Had this left over from the unloading coal car, didn’t want to haul it home,” he would say. Yes, there has always been a lot of kindness among Hamilton’s business people.

Going back to the big mill times, there was the Burk Hotel, corner Main and South Seventh, a two-story frame home for many of the mill hands. And there was the wide boardwalk from up-town west, clear to the mill. Early morning or 5 o’clock whistle of the mill and the sound of clomping of feet to and from work was every workday’s contribution to Hamilton noises.

The mill payroll has never been equaled for Hamilton.
Christmas Gift! The salutation of old, the greeting that expressed Christmas spirit perhaps better than common “Merry Christmas.”

Christmas has no sweeter tradition than children down through the ages have woven around it. “The stockings hung by the chimney with care” and the trust of little people in the fantasy of Santa Claus is almost one with their love of the Christmas Story. Story beautiful story of the Christ child.

Christmas Gift, Montana! Greetings from the mountain rimmed valley that truly is your birthplace as a state.

Listen Montana when Chinook winds blow from this corner of your realm. St. Mary’s mountain with its shawl of winter white, looking down on the old mission field and the little log chapel that is now a shrine, guards it all, after one century and a quarter of another one, brings this Christmastime of 1975. The Chinook’s chant will remind you that this Bitterroot Valley was your birthplace in the autumn of 1841.

The Chinook chanting will tell you too, how the vale that gave you rights, first as a territory, then as a state, became in truth a Christmas gift to you in 1891 and how the gift was wrapped in sacrifice of their very birthright by the Salish Indian people.

They worshipped something above the treetops before they learned of the Christian’s God and their petition to the Jesuits for teaching of Christianity, was only received after strong young braves had risked and lost lives in hostile Indian raids across their trails eastward to St. Louis, the “Blackrobes campground.” Strangely though, it was Indian telling by wandering Iroquois that brought the first word to the Salish and their Kootenai neighbors who shared this Bitterroot before the exodus in 1891 to a reservation in another alley.

All this lore of our Bitterroot Valley Heritage – yes our American Heritage too, is factual and St. Mary’s Peak is a monument to that first Montana observance of Christmas, a monument to the “Birthplace of Montana.”

The welcome party for the good Jesuits was an autumn occasion for the Indian hosts, then like good neighborhood folks, these Americans of Indian birthright, pitched in to help found a white settlement, a village centered by a church with its school too for children. St. Mary’s Village endured and the Jesuits tolled to bring about agriculture and irrigation from the virgin land and untroubled creek waters. In the springtime Indians, a bit skeptical as to the miracle of seed bringing forth grain and other plants for sustenance, came to realize that Nature’s foods could be supplemented by field and garden.

All life was not changed for them however. They accepted the teaching and the good knowledge of making their land produce, yet they loved their nature ways and the harvesting of her wild roots and berries; they gave nature warmth of silent thanks. One thing as to the Indian appreciation of nature’s gifts – never did the Indians waste, nor did they kill more then need called for at a time. They dried fruit and roots, they used even the marrow of bones from the game they hunted; the deerskin was treasured as a clothing item, carefully tanned for robe and moccasin; so too were the buffalo hides made useful and the meat for the plains Indians especially, a life necessity.
All the Montana country, mountain valley, prairie and wilderness had only conservation and careful harvesting of natural resources when the Indian tribes were the only inhabitants. The Bitterroot Valley offered so much in resources; it still does, yet there is something of a lack in these later years, lack of care for resources, need for more caution in the taking, whether it be the meat of game animals or other wild harvest; careful timber cutting, care of watershed and of water resource; nurture for the soil that gives with harvest yield.

All this is a forerunner as to the Christmas Message attempted by a blundering scribe. The beginning year of the Bicentennial was 1776, but the thirteen colonies and their settlement by courageous emigrants from other lands across the Atlantic Ocean, was still unknown to the Bitterroot Indians then. They saw no men of the Caucasian race before 1805 when Lewis and Clark, the Louisiana Purchase explorers, stumbled into the valley over a “Lost Trail.”

That was 36 years before the Jesuits came. But it was a romantic bit of history relating to a little wild flower that finally became a printing of words in the white man’s book before the Jesuits time in the valley. Lewis and his company learned much in the way of botanical resource, but for Lewis, a botanist himself there was the romance of carting a dried root from our hills to Missouri for experiment. He was told that the roots were food if they were first peeled; the tough rind was bitter; they had their own name, spetlum or variations, all meaning “bitter;” so came the white man’s name, “bitter root” for the blossoms of pink, silky textured, our June blooming state floral emblem, the Bitterroot.

Came the year 1891, after Chief Charlot and his Salish Indians could no longer cope with the stilted way of living forced by the orders of civilization. They were forced to accept exile from their birthright valley, to give it, literally, to the white man and his horde of settlers.

The Americans spirit must recognize the sacrifice of our Salish and Kootenai Indians, as a Christmas Gift. And the Christianity the Indians accepted from the spiritual Jesuits – there still is a Christmas truth.

There is the Indian way of respecting natural resources. May we all accept that as a part of the American Way of Life. An Indian maxim that is all good. Christmas Gift, Everybody. Yes and Merry Christmas!
Tammany was a racehorse. Tammany was a history making, swift-legged stallion that came to the Marcus Daly stables and pastures of the Bitterroot Stock Farm as a colt, a beautiful chestnut colt with a white blaze down his face and a knowing eye for people. Old timers said Tammany was the gentleman in his manners and he loved people. There was immediately a bond between Tammany the colt and his owner. Daly appreciated Tammany more each year as the blooded colt grew to racing status and took to training with the same natural talent he had given to grazing in the pastures.

Marcus Daly singled out Tammany from his other blooded race horses. This man of the stock farm and the racetracks had been a farm boy in Ireland for the first fifteen years of his life. He had an innate love of horses, and even gave the pigs he was hired to feed his best attention. Marcus, the boy, loved the country of his birth, yet he found its green fields held no future other than what the scrimping, hard-worked parents, Luke and Mary, had ever known. Tenant farmers shared crops with the lords of the land.

The Irish boy crossed the sea to America. He slaved first as a dockhand in the New York port and finally at 20 years of age in the west, he became a miner. He made good, working for other mining men and packing more mine knowledge in his head than most men, determined on “amounting to something” as he put it. It was with all that experience, luck good and bad and still working for others, that Marcus Daly came into Montana Territory, bringing his wife and four children to live in the roaring mining town of Butte.

Then one day he made a deal. He sold his interest in a Butte mine and trusted luck; he went into business for himself. Outcrop of that made the mining camp known as Butte the location of “The Richest Hill on Earth” and that Daly-coined slogan reached all parts of the Earth.

The same derring-do of his years in mining development made Marcus Daly take risks with tongue in cheek, but ever with that Irish air when he launched other ventures. He first founded the town he named Anaconda because of his interest in mining development and built the biggest smelter in the world. After a while, when the mining camp was claiming too much time and interest, Marcus Daly “went over the hill” so to speak. That was in 1886, three years after he had “started the city of Anaconda because we could not find enough water at any place nearer Butte.”

That three years at Anaconda saw the smelter project in action. What next?

The “other side of the hill” proved to be a thinly settled valley that must have reminded Daly of his boyhood County Cavan, a notable, richly fertile land of natural resource with mountain ranges and hill pastures. The Bitterroot won the Irish heart of Marcus Daly, by that time a very tired mining expert looking for a place to rest. More than 20,000 acres might seem like too big a ranching enterprise for any man’s spare time, but Daly fenced his fields and planted trees along the lanes that separated on a big scale.

Yes, he bought cattle and sheep and hogs, but he also bought horses, stout registered teams for ranch work, prancing steeds for coaches, buggies and trail riding, horses his cowboys and shepherders needed in tending the hundreds of cattle and sheep.
So much for a truly domestic picture. Of course Marcus Daly saw to it that a mansionlike home for his family was erected on an estate adjoining the big ranch. Nothing was too good for his Bitterroot Stock Farm and the Daly family. Nothing was too good for the people on his payroll who made this new ranching venture successful.

Biographers tell that it was about 1888 when Marcus Daly felt the need of escape from the overburdening business of his vast operations; he had long had a desire to own “the best farm that money could buy.” He wanted to develop and train fine horses, too. That all came about on his Bitterroot Stock Farm. And Tammany, that chestnut colt was for a few short years a dream realized.

It was for this most loved racer that Daly built a priceless stable that he named Tammany Castle and he built two fine race tracks for Montana meets, one at Butte and one at Anaconda. On his Hamilton acres he built covered tracks to exercise horses and Tammany was trained from the coltish first year on, to become the winner of races, coming to glory by winning the Eclipse Stakes in New York in his race track debut.

Greatest of Tammany’s triumphs was the defeat of the great eastern horse, Lamplighter. As a three-year-old, Tammany gave faultless performance on the track; he was a four-year-old when the victory over the great Lamplighter startled the racing world.

The news from Butte papers and from Daly’s own Anaconda Standard surely told Montana people Marcus Daly’s Tammany was their star of the turf and they were glad.

Tammany was ever the favorite of the Daly stables because of his good nature and his love of company. In his Tammany Castle he had no vault in which to store the winnings of his races, only a great heart and a head full of good horse sense that united to direct his fleet legs in the running of the great races of his time.

Once this writer walked carefully around a plaque-like painting – on a floor of all places. The picture painted by a noted artist showed the beautiful head with its wise expression accented by the white blaze face, the pointed ears with the look of life. The chestnut coloring was so natural. But the artist had given action all the chance in the world. The head of Tammany, neck outstretched, was pictured as it must have looked in that race with the great Lamplighter.

That painting was Marcus Daly’s memorial to his beloved Tammany, thoroughbred that lived and died in Tammany Castle on the Bitterroot Stock Farm. The painting is an inset of the floor of the old-time bar room of Daly’s Montana Hotel in Anaconda; there seemed to be an unwritten law that told guests never to walk on that picture; it was a know fact that Daly always walked around it.

End of an era

There are possibly a good many Montanans who can scare up recollections of the “back yonder” stuff in newspapers and magazines that related the coming of the “horseless carriage.” Prophecies were rife as to how vehicles propelled by electric power or by oil and gas would in time revolutionize transportation the world over. Transit by means of horse-drawn vehicles would end perhaps for good. Railroads could continue even if their trains were pulled by coal burning steam engines. Eventually electric power would win the day with the railroads, even. And that came to pass with some.

In summary, that shadow of “what’s agoin’ to be” seemed to foretell a complete pushing out for the horses that pulled wagons, high-stepped as steeds harnessed to the phaetons and carriages of the rich, took buggies with sweetheart couples for rides on long
country roads or took saddle and bridle for trail travel. In fact, horses or mules had to be the means prospectors of old and the firefighters and forest rangers of the early Forest Service years employed to get over hills and down dales.

Wagon wheels and old buggies became collectors’ items, but what of it? Well, the buggy at least is coming back and it will be hitched to a prancing horse, like always. Every now and then, man for all his inventive genius, has an attack of common sense. He takes a backward look to note such things as the buggy and maybe the sidesaddle that womenfolks carefully draped a long skirt over when they mounted Ol’ Surefoot for a canter on the country road; you never can tell, but this old gal doubts that this graceful old style of riding ever will come back.

In the first place, women disdained the straddle type as a no-no that was only the way of the Indian squaw. The Indian women knew best though and eventually sidesaddle went into mothballs for good. First it was a full-fashioned “divided skirt” that reached the ankles, then overalls and at last riding britches. Now it is almost “Goodbye skirts” for all active women.

All the hue and cry of a worldwide “energy crisis” has had an effect on the American Way of Life, more especially the people accustomed to the easy way of electrical management in commercial as well as domestic lines. One hears moaning – “Who wants to go back to the ‘horse-and-buggy days,’ the times of wood-powered cookstoves and box heaters? Gee Whiz! What will they take away next?”

Common sense tells us that all our natural resources, such as the source of electricity, need the attention of all of us, the generations that have had life in the horse-and-buggy era and the young folks of today who never knew what a convenient and pleasurable life they afforded before the time of the automobile. Backward looks at progress can be educating.

More than a few residents of the Bitterroot Valley started right away to conserve energy. Stoves that burned wood instead of oil or electricity came into use in country homes and even use of gasoline would get a bit of thoughtful action. The family car, still a requisite, would not be on the road nearly as often; then in other instances like stock feeding in winter, the hay rack would be pulled by a team of horses morning and evening while the big farm truck was left in the shed. Common sense power directing horse power is coming back in style, for country folks.

When September’s first week rolls around and the Ravalli County Fair’s three days of the people’s own Exposition of Progress takes over at the Fairground, there’s goin’ to be something besides the traditional race card for horses to present, not only in showing speed, but other action. Wait and see!
Here it is again, the first day of the Ravalli County Fair and that, my friends, tells what tradition takes for granted; like our old weekly newspapers that forever chose Thursday as time to circulate their gifts to the reading folks. (At two dollars a year, subscription) the good weekly “News of late – with its pages eight” – almost anybody could afford to subscribe, or even pay a nickel at the print shop for the paper. “It happened every Thursday,” was a general slogan.

And each annual County Fair Thursday was rather a holiday recognized by the whole county – in the Bitterroot at least.

This 1980 Thursday morning, the Daily Ravalli Republic as far as “B.K. FILE” is concerned, leads off with grateful heart to Ned Applebury and his office crew, the County Fair Board and the Ravalli County Commissioners. Hooray! And God Bless you all for a good job.

This Election Year for our whole country, 1980 has just as much importance for Ravalli County and its communities as for Washington, the capital of our United States of America. Tis just a belated idea of this file, but it would seem very much of an eye-catcher if this morning’s parade could be pulled along in make-believe harmony by an Elephant and a Donkey, their banner might be worded to warn the people that Friday would find them calling each other names again.

After all though, these election fevers carry along, tempos climbing higher and hotter every day. But let’s all put the names of candidates and what they do or don’t stand for, clear out of mind. Let all the Fairtime handshakes be sincere and the talk have the good old-time Ravalli County Fair Flavor.

And isn’t it great to be Americans!

Every Thursday those weeklies, three of them in our Ravalli County, carried on with “Build-the-Bitterroot” policies and news; valiant always until one by one they yielded to Time, the old boss who marked off just another day when lamplight toned up home rest hours and the working menfolks could take “after supper” hours off to settle down and read the home paper, it might have been any one or maybe all three, Ravalli Republic and Western News with Jim Conkey and Miles Romney I calling one another on the carpet, or Bill Cochran, the placid Stevensville editor, who didn’t seem to worry much about his Hamilton contemporaries, and might be, Bill was the wisest of them all.

But you couldn’t find three newspaper publishers who forgave and forgot, in any Montana town or county like “Jim and Miles and Bill.” Their differences seemed to retire when weekends found time for friendly chats. I knew them well. When I worked for the Republican that coincided with my politics. When I worked for Romney, I kept still and stayed friends with father and son. Bill Cochran was a most dependable ally when I needed a bit of help as to Stevensville goings-on, like history gathering.

Back to the Ravalli County Fair – there’s a bit of International History that old-timers brought about. Early in the 19th century, across the sea in Ireland a lad named Marcus Daly knew only farm life and its chores and – county fair happenings. Mark, as his parents called him, seemed to hold on to his farm heritage until he decided to embark for America. So many other lines like mining were his living until he saw the Bitterroot and
recognized it as farm country he had dreamed about. As a relief from his mines, Daly took on farming on rather a big scale. His farm of 22,000 acres, his town and its lumber industry became his sideline. The very first county fair here came from his one-man inspiration. There was still the old country flare to motivate country doings. And that’s the international heritage that still is the spirit of our annual Ravalli County Fair. So many emigrating men and women settled for this Bitterroot country to take on citizenship even before Daly’s time. So may they too be honored in our 1980 summary of Ravalli County’s “Friends and Neighbors.”

Hail to this 1980 gathering of fair-makers and patrons and all the historic efforts that gave it a rightful place in the Montana sun.
This November holiday week smacks of wildlife ideas as to water fowl and "duck dinners," especially, like Harrey Lee Horn used to put out each November.

But this Duck Deal, dinner or not, was an actual 1909 experience of mine.

It was late summertime when Darby was my temporary home with my in-law family, Dr. and Mrs. George W. Monroe in that up-valley neighborhood. My Forest Ranger husband was on the Bitterroot fire patrol before we went to our new Idaho station.

Mother Monroe was a home body who in addition to being Dr. Monroe's good wife and "right hand," was proud of a poultry clan of buff Kochen hens and a flock of white ducks. They may have been Pekins, but anyway they were tame quackers who had a tiny pool of their own in the back lot of the big home.

There they were fed and in the right time their good owner, garbed in an over-all apron, picked their breast feathers and stored the white fluff in a cloth sack. There was a feather pillow aim, as the good housewife already owned a feather bed that later was willed to me.

Well, one morning that flock of nine white ducks was missing. We searched every nook and cranny and had no luck for a trail of white feathers until at last I found the quackers had waddled their way our of a corner and up a little slope to the bank of the giant water way known as the "Waddell Ditch" that had its source in the Tin Cup Creek a mile away. It was at least four miles to the John Waddell ranch south of Como and it turned out, that the Monroe white ducks had been sighted in the ditch more than a mile where the ditch had a fence across it.

I was young and equal to a tame duck hunt, so I took off north and walked a long mile to that fence ditch crossing where I heard contented ducks quacking over scattered grain. No one was around, so I waved my steering stick at the turants and darned if they didn't seem to recognize my voice when I yelled. "Go home!"

Dr. Monroe accomplished some needed "fence mending" at once and I went in the house in the house and took a needed foot bath. But that wasn't the last of the duck hunt.

Two days later Dr. Monroe received a letter from an irate housewife who lived where the fence corner became a duck haven on the Waddell Ditch. It went like this:

"Sir, your daughter-in-law, Bessie, did come to a corner of my home yard and she drove away nine white ducks that was mine; I fed them for a week and I want her to bring them right back." A threat of some action if the nine ducks weren't returned failed to worry him. Days passed and we heard no more threats.

Eventually our ducks were "picked" each season and new pillows came about. But it was a story and briefly, I was almost a heroine.
Back yonder it was, when this scribe’s real writin’ for newspapers was keepin’ me busy and my earnings were something else – never past the hundred dollar mark. Despite the low wages, we still worked with care. There were late hours that the news folks never called “moonlight” stuff because it was the real newspaper method – latest hours of the days that began “right after breakfast,” by 8 a.m.

And they could easy move past “midnight oil” lamplight in small towns, or bulb power of 2 a.m. News-covering order let the notebook shut up.

The story down to the very last “30” line was the news desk in the editor’s sanction. The reporter could go home or if it had been a critical happening with telephone coverage there would be – “That’s it” and hang up. No moon, new or full, or the day – “Moonlightin’” – no sir, just on the job, day or night.

Years brought a kind of “cash on the barrel” out of the monthly paycheck. Social Security took over as a federal order. Percentage wise, earnings were divided. Home shared with federal needs, like storing up so much for Uncle Sam to create a port of insurance for old age retirement.

Even if it did have a kind of “short-change” aura, Social Security, for the whole figure on the salary paper, was big. Yet in the maturity of 80 to the 90 and 96 birthdays, Social Security always keeps the faith – and me in support.

Father Time is a ruthless sort of parent in some of his timing deals, but as a boss of the year, let alone the days and weeks, time bids one to serve as best we can, even in these “last-of-a-century” years.

And the account of life times and their endings are kind of tattle tale of life’s record-keepers. They are an “amen” that truly means “so be it” for us has-beens.

Yet I’d rather be a has-been than a never-was-er.

Looking back over the years of work that included family and a lot of good times too, gives lessons and I am still learning to right mistakes.

Life is still good.
APPENDIX 2

SAMPLES OF B.K. MONROE’S POETRY

B.K.’s book of poetry, Bitter Root and Other Montana Verse, succeeded five printings, the first in 1957 and the last in 1982. The second printing, in 1973, entirely sold out.¹

B.K. did not write about her passion for poetry in her columns and personal documents, she simply wrote poetry. “She painted pictures with her poems,” her daughter, Ada Zoske said.

Zoske said her mother began writing poems early in her journalism career after her husband died. Verse probably came to B.K. in small pieces throughout the day, pulled as a line or rhyme and placed in her notebook for later development.

Her first poems were published in the “Oracle,” a Missoulian column boxed on the opinion page. It was created by editor French Ferguson, whom B.K. admired because he allowed writers a chance on that page.²

Twenty of her poems were published in the anthology The Badge of Honor, printed by Poetry House in 1942. Miles Romney Jr. treated the event with an extensive story on the life of B.K. in Hamilton’s weekly Western News. He began:

Due recognition of the literary talent of Mrs. Bessie K. Monroe, longtime Hamilton and Bitter Root valley resident, is made by the selection .... Bitter Rooters can be proud to note that perhaps more of Mrs. Monroe’s verse is included within the volume’s covers than of any other writer.³

Also, her contributions in the Bitter Root Historical Society’s Bitterroot Trails volumes included poems, “The Bitter Root Flower” and “Forgotten Road”; and essays, “John Waddell Family,” “Eliza Whinery,” “The Kerlees of Darby,” “Neighbors of Kerlees,” “The Logging Camp Cookhouse,” and “Thompson Family.”⁴
B.K. did not live to see her poems published in Henry Hamilton Grant’s 1997 book, *This Is My Bitterroot*. Included by B.K. in the tribute to the valley and Montana’s state flower were “Ravalli’s Land” and “Bitterroot.”

In 1957, reporter Helen R. Taber, working for Miles Romney’s *Western News*, met B.K., who inspired Taber as a journalist. She asked B.K. to sign a poetry book hot off the press. B.K. addressed the book to the “good little news woman of P.T.A. with warm regard.” Taber recalled in a column:

Directly by her writing and just as strongly through many personal speaking engagements before school and community groups, B.K. has inspired young and old. As though intended for her entire wide-flung audience, one of her poems entitled “Friendship” seems to describe particularly her own relationship with the community. ... To read her poetry is to gain a sense of history and to know B.K.’s heart. ... B.K.’s warm thoughtful nostalgia is especially poetry for Montanans and those who would know Montana better.

Many of B.K.’s poems branched from a story or column theme to which she devoted herself in the news world. Since the topics of her poetry tie to the history and philosophy she was most fond of covering, perhaps they served as the most succinct synopsis of her personal views on the subjects; nuggets of her beliefs.

Clever and flowery, occasionally righteous, B.K.’s voice is recognizable in both rhythm and tone of her poems. Her poetry served as an outlet not judged for its newsworthiness.

In 1959, the *Spokesman Review* published a photo page of work by Ernst Peterson, a beloved Bitterroot Valley photographer, and a poem by B.K. Monroe, “Little Minister Trillium.” The newspaper article described writer and photographer pairing their talents in Christmas and Easter card creation for family and friends. It said:
These particular cards pretty well round up a Montana year. Each is very simple with the photo in black and white on page one of a four-page folding card. ... Simplicity, then is the keynote.

Simplicity is the keynote of her poems, too. For the most part, they are based on the photo and are seasonal in subject and lyrical treatment. Some phase of the landscape or of the animal life in her beloved Bitter Root valley almost always makes the subject.⁹

Occasionally she joined Peterson in making cards. But B.K. constantly wrote new poems at Christmas and for many Easters. She typed the verse on greeting cards for family and friends.

B.K.’s columns in later years took on the flair and flavor of her poetry. A handful of times she published a poem within one of her columns. But while she discussed her personal life in her columns, she never referred to her poetry. In a column in 1983, B.K. thanked her former editor Bob Gilluly for opening her to the world of creative writing in newspapers by allowing her to occasionally sit-in for his weekly column, “Sittin’ and Thinkin’.” “Bob was a good boss,” she wrote.¹⁰

Gilluly honored B.K.’s poetic spirit during the week following her death in his Great Falls Tribune column. He wrote: “B.K. was a tough competitor, but she had a poetic heart and mind.”¹¹

B.K.’s poems are often personal, reflecting her parents and childhood.

Earlier poems primarily contained themes of nature and Bitterroot Valley history. She also illustrated the passage of time throughout her life in poetic descriptions of the relationship between humans, their environment and God. The following poems were selected for their themes on which B.K. also focused many newspaper columns and historical pieces: early explorers and pioneer settlers, the exile of the Salish from the valley, the beauty of each season, the changing views on the environment.
Bitterroot

Bitterroot, rife in the June time
Wild little western flower;
Blest with the power of healing —
Part of the Red Man’s dower.

Pink shells with silken lining,
Grouped in flowery clan,
Brown roots clinging fast to the gravel
In fear of the Medicine Man.

Closing bright hearts at even,
With folding petal bars,
Kissed by the morning dew drops
To day time desert stars.

Holding a state’s allegiance
Since with beauty and charm and cheer,
They lighted the primeval landscape
And the path of the pioneer. 12

Lake Como in the Rockies

Lake of the mountains, you hold in trust
The snows of yesteryear;
Your depths give back the snows that shine
On peaks above you there.

Tell me your secret, lake of the woods,
For I would learn of you
To keep the good of the olden year
And blend it with the new. 13
Forest Elegy

Gray ashes on the forest floor,
Black ghosts that once were trees,
Majestic in the winter snows
Or swayed to summer breeze.

“Trees that looked to God all day
And lifted leafy arms to pray.”

A thousand years, nay more, they grew,
There in the mountain sod;
Their clean, brown trunks told sweetly of
The careful ways of God.

Desolate now, and forsaken
By creatures of the wild,
The gaunt old hills cry out in shame,
Where once their glory smiled.

Down where men write the records,
The curious may scan—
“Ten thousand acres: size of fire;
Cause: carelessness of man.”

Down Tree

The cut-down tree is still alive,
Though it has lain for months in snow;
When warm days come the sunshine
Lights frozen twigs until they glow
Again with life.

The sparrows and the chickadees
And now and then a bluejay knave,
Still hunt its branches, there to swing
And chirp in sadness of their brave
And fallen friend.

When night winds touch it passing,
The tree makes gallant song,
A sweet farewell to sky and summer sun,
Dear God why does it take so long
For trees to die?
Old Mountain Mill

Pioneers builded that mountain mill
Beside the trail's rough way,
Young pines grew down to its very door
And the wild rose held its sway
When summer came to the hills.

The walls grew weatherstained, deep brown,
The mill was crude to the eye,
But the snarling saw had a song of its own,
A song, half joy, half sigh,
A stolen note from the hills.

Pine logs crept to its biting edge,
Were slashed into raw, sweet boards —
There's no fragrance like the scent of pine
Fresh-loosed from the centuries' hoards
Of sunlight in the hills.

Brown bark stripped by iron teeth,
Heart of a tree laid bare,
That men might build their pioneer homes
And with one another share
The conquering of the hills.

Roar of the wild creek's harnassed power,
Spray of the mill wheel's flood,
Tears of the mountains, trapped by men
To give the mill heart blood,
Blood from the heart of the hills.

Something transient, like brave wildfire
Would flame in my childish heart
Whenever I stopped to watch the mill,
Playing for men its part,
Taking God's gifts from the hills. 16
God’s Logging Plan

God planted His trees in the first place,
That His valleys might know rest;
He made of the hills rich backdrops
For scenes He loved the best.
He taught the trees to guard the snows
And the mountain rains to hold —
Yes, God meant for men to cut His trees
When they were ripe and old,
But He meant they should gather them here and there
Like a woman picking her flowers,
Who leaves the buds to richly blow
For the good of future hours.
In His vast and rock-rimmed gardens,
The greatest logger of all,
Has platted lessons for all to learn,
Has hymned the forest call
For a thoughtful preservation
Of forest and watershed —
“What shall ye use for timber
If all of your trees be dead?”
His questions still goes farther
For mankind’s living needs
Must have mankind’s protection
Back to the very seeds.
The Good Earth has a pattern
But she must have a hand
In working out salvation
For our God-given land. 17

Thought for Conservation

I like to think when winter comes,
Our God has sent the snows
To make His forests blossom
With many and many a rose
Of Purity.

His plan goes far; there must be base
If resource be not lost,
And forests living, hold this rule —
That men must count the cost
Of Surety. 18
Workin' Woman

There's so many things I'd write about, if I had time
An' words to tell about this ol' world's beauty,
But when I stop to fool around and rhyme,
I'm pestered with the thoughts of some awaitin' duty.
I wish that I could tell jest how I feel at night,
When I'm a-watchin' of the moon, a-rollin' round the heavens,
Them smoke-gray clouds that ketch and bed it down so light,
But there — my kitchen work is waitin', at sixes and at sevens.

I don't mind it when the leaves come fallin' down so thick,
To clutter up the yard and blow up in the door,
It kinds hurts to see 'em raked and burned so quick,
As if the purty fall-time was jest a drudge's chore.
The flowers in my garden have turned to sweet, brown ghosts
That whisper in the evenin' wind so I'll know they're still alive,
And standin' by the garden, old sentries at their posts —
My lands! The hands of that there clock are pointin' straight to five!

There's that bald-top mountain shinin' to the west,
Looks like it had a sheet caught on its tallest trees,
The snow that makes it white will stay till June, I guess;
Last night we had a real November freeze.
But today, the sun's a-shinin' like as if it was a prize
Handed down to this ol' earth, straight from Kingdom Come.
Who wants to read their title to mansions in the skies,
When they can work and watch all day
The blessed hills of home?

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Old September Wheat (On Reading a Market Report)

Dormant, dull with the bin's white dusk
The hardened wheat has lain
While wan sad ghosts of the harvest,
Wept for the useless grain.
Wept for the golden loaves of bread
That little children need,
Wept for the woes of all the earth
Made by a few men's greed.

Wept for the lost, lost vision
That came when the wheat was ripe
To light the eyes of the planter;
Painting a golden stripe
At the edge of a summer rainbow
Ending in hills of hope —
How can a rainbow vanish
And leave sad men to grope?

Profit and loss on paper,
Ways for a world to cheat,
How shall the wise men answer
For old September wheat? 20

Bitter Root Elegy

A vale of the good, old Rockies,
My cottonwoods and pines gave shelter from storm
Some were cut into logs soon walled into homes.
Bushes gave berries, wild plants, their roots
Deer in my forests and fish in wild waters
All were food for the taking, Indian neighbors said.
Salish and Kootenai
Sadly in exile, and all without gunfire,
Their moccasins took them.
They left me. I am an heritage
Bestowed on the White Man's Children. 21
Forgive Me, Taxidermists!

I’ve never been able to draw on illusion
When I see a deer’s head hanging stark on a wall –
That outside the house a live body is cruising,
About to burst in, when the head sounds a call.

A goat’s head at angle for spontaneous butting,
Backed by a shield of high-varnished wood,
Leaves me in doubt as to Bill’s chance at putting
If he were trailing that head as he should.

A whole elk with horns may be good taxidermy,
But he’s out when it comes to nature’s own dope –
I can’t see his mission; my thoughts go all squirmy,
To me he is simply an elk without hope.

O whether it’s Mallard or ruff grouse or pheasant,
Gay fox or squirrel, wildcat or moose,
I still say that meeting ‘em dead isn’t pleasant –
I’d rather take chances with all on the loose.

Glass eyes may have luster, but they’re all out of fashion
When it comes to delivering the natural goods.
No one ever froze a wild doe’s expression
When she lifted her head to gaze from the woods.  

Montana Christmas

New snow on Old St. Mary’s
And all the other peaks,
New ice along the Tincup
And all the other creeks
Old Star above the Sapphires
Shines like a cabin lamp
Down from Heaven’s window pane
To light the trails we tramp.
Old homes light lamps of welcome
And church bells ring in glory
As men of God open His book
To read the Christmas story. 

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Christmas Gift

It was lonesome-like on the trapline trail,
For the mountain hush was deep;
Long years were gone since his boyhood,
But memories, somehow keep.

And here it was – Christmas morning
With him in a world of his own;
The white old hills with their Christmas trees
Spoke only the word – “Alone.”

The marten, held in the steel trap,
By one little sharp-clawed foot,
Sent him a look of rage and pain
As the trapper’s winter boot
Put down a weight on the steel jaws
To spring a swift release –
“Git goin’ you little son-of-a-gun.”
And the white hills whispered – “Peace.”

The Ranger Man

He comes a ridin’ by my ranch
Out there at Timberline,
A pack-horse totin’ his beddin’ roll,
Not carin’ fer rain or shine.
He whistles as he rides the trail
And seems like a right good feller,
He stops sometimes to smoke and chat –
Say, he’s some story-teller.

I swap him hist’ry fer what he knows
Of the big old world outside,
Fer he’s traveled some in his day an’ time,
All over the country wide.
But after all, he’s common like,
Not braggin’ or lettin’ on
But what I’m just as smart as him,
Though I aint never gone
Away from these hills and that ranch o’ mine
That I homesteaded some years back,
So when we git to smokin’ up
The cheer begins to stack.
We’ve swapped receets fer sourdough bred
And he’s told me them Latin names
Of the fir and cedar and scrub jackpine
An’ how to fight the flames
That comes each year in lightnin’ time,
A lickin’ the trees all bare
An leavin’ only ugly gloom
Where all was green an’ fair

I don’t shoot deer just any ol’ time
Since the Ranger come out here,
But it aint because I’ve come to feel
Of the game laws any fear.
No, I just sorta want to help that man
Perfect the woods and game,
So, I’ll try to do my darndest
To keep it all the same.
I kinda like the ranger man
An’ I watch fer him on the trail
That comes around my medder
Below that stretch o’ shale.
Fer he alius waves his Stetson
An’ “Yoohoo” comes his yell
When he stops to let his cayuse through
The bars of my ol’ c’rall.

From his lookout on the mountain,
The ranger man looks down
To watch fer smoke or timber blaze,
Then he chases the smudges down.
We used t’ let the timber burn
Without tryin’ to life a hand,
But that was before the day and time
Of the gov’ment ranger man. 25
White Shadows

Strange that the hushed, dim halls where sickness dwells
Should stir a song within my heart,
I, who am not strong-willed enough to look upon pain
Without an answering pain –
But sometimes when I turn away from those who have faced death and won,
It comes to me that this is all a glorious part
Of life itself; that men and women facing life again,
After a look at death, can give to life
A something new and infinite – a healing touch
That can mend souls and lend to broken lives
A prop to lean upon.

Out of the shadows comes again,
Life with a new-found reason,
Stripped of all pretense, glad in weariness
That yester clouds have vanished with the night.
Daybreak at last and lights of suffering have changed
To lights of hope that shed their gleam from eyes that rest
And resting, know their God has helped to make things right.

And some will tell you – "God be thanked!"
I mean no blasphemy, the Saints forbid,
But this I know – that God must work by the skill of men.
And so I, who am not strong-willed enough to look upon pain
Without an answering pain,
When I look upon the light of hope in eyes that have faced death and won,
Humbly bow my head and thank that God again,
That men are given heart and skill
To conquer others’ pain.26
Friendship

Something that stands the test of time,
Something that mellows with age,
Something that glistens with holy light,
As I turn life’s full writ page.

Something to give me wisdom,
To cheer me as I plod —
The bond of mortal friendship,
That fingertouch of God.

Something too strong for anger —
Too wise to scorn mistake —
The tie that holds through fire and rain,
Still sweet for old time’s sake. 27

Man’s Quest

Old Jim sat reading a magazine
That young Jim brought from town;
The old man’s heart was not in the theme
If you judged by his quick-drawn frown.
Stories and poems, master finds
Of the editorial lights—
They seem to be makin’ fun these days
Of plain old Christian rights. 28

Modern blows at age-old creeds,
New creeds that puzzled his honest heart,
Old Jim as he read the magazine,
Saw the good laws fall apart,
A crumbling heap of time-worn words,
Like scattered bits of a clod;
But he smiled as his good mind labored on —
“Men still are a lookin’ for God.” 29
Tin Cup Homespun

I'm a Tin Cup hill billy
with not too much schoolin'
Still I know I learned
a lot from my hills,
How bushy-tailed squirrels
made caches of pine cones
With their winged brown kernels
no cone ever spills.
A hillside made walls for a homestead's dirt cellar
An' good stovewood was cut
from hillside dead trees,
Then sometimes old pines
held stores of wild honey
An' we helped ourselves
without askin' the bees.
I just can't make
this writin' no longer
But keep your eyes on the hills
They help you get stronger.


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**INTERVIEWS**


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PERIODICALS


UNPUBLISHED MATERIALS


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