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MONTANA'S RURAL ELDERLY

By

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Elderly people living in rural areas are one of society’s most vulnerable populations. As rural populations decrease, they face diminishing access to health care and social services. In Montana, Phillips County is still part of frontier America. It has fewer than one person per square mile and is unquestionably rural. But do its residents feel vulnerable? Do they still have access to health care and adequate support systems?

Interviews with the old-timers in Phillips County show that their concerns have little to do with their health or their proximity to a hospital. Instead, they are concerned that the land that they worked all their lives is slowly being converted into a bird and wildlife refuge. They are afraid that the weather, the high cost of farming, and stringent federal policies will make their way of life—farming and ranching—disappear. They see their children choosing other vocations because many cannot afford to work the land.

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner noted that people who are in contact with the frontier are a unique breed—tough, self-reliant, inventive individuals who must adapt quickly to their ever-changing environment. In this county, and others in the Western Great Plains, there are fewer and fewer old-timers. The population is rapidly decreasing. Rutgers University researchers argued 15 years ago that the remaining populations on the Western Plains be relocated, and the area re-populated with buffalo. Even years later, this proposal is met with contempt in Phillips County. Residents see their land slowly purchased by conservation groups, and valued for recreation instead of food production.

This professional project found that these individuals hope that with tourism, or a change in food prices, or the collapse of the mega-farm, they might be able to preserve their way of life. This paper explores the values these people bring to society, the challenges they face in preserving their way of life, and options that could help sustain the rural community.
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The Montana Hi-Line welcomes us with its dead. We drive into Chinook, 30 miles south of the Canadian border, and a polished silver-gray hearse coasts past. Down the first four blocks of Indiana Street, one for sale sign hangs in a window, and particle board blocks another entrance. In another window, a mannequin lies naked and twisted. It’s tough to judge if the store is disorganized, closed for the day, or even abandoned.

Fifty miles east, storefronts in Dodson are boarded up, deserted. The tracks of the Great Northern, which parallel the Hi-Line, have fewer towns along their path than they used to: in 1957, an obituary for the town of Bowdoin appeared in the Phillips County News. Where there was once a roller rink and candy stores and people, too, is a brown rolling field where one empty grain elevator stands just south of the highway.

Back on the Hi-Line, driving, we see cottonwoods ahead while the sky unfurls in the rear view mirror. Thirty miles later, Saco. Here, gravity has taken advantage of a shift in the weight of decaying wooden buildings and tugs the structures toward the ground at odd angles. A peculiar air pervades Saco and the other towns in Phillips County. Watching the buildings’ shadows bow to the setting sun feels like watching a child at play alone at dusk. Or like listening to shallow, rasping breathing from old lungs.

The towns feel tired. So does the surrounding land: for years, say the locals, they have waited for a good rain to fall.

Generations swindled the first dwellers—Assiniboine, Piegan and Gros Ventre Indians—out of the land. The government granted land to the railroad, and together they lured homesteaders out west with cheap tickets, and descriptions of land as lush as the Garden of Eden. When hopeful homesteaders arrived, it was not the condition of the land that kept them there; many stayed because they had no money to travel elsewhere, and
their children were hungry. So the people farmed and ranched. Later, they drilled for gas and mined gold. They pocketed some money, but most went to corporate owners.

Today, the land—and the weather and policies that govern its use—spits out many of the young and ambitious and chases them away to distant towns where at least, says one, there’s a bowling alley to bring a family to on a Friday night. The old leave, too. In this part of America, the residents exhume dinosaur bones from the earth, and into it they lower the bones of old friends. The first commercial rail cars that passed through the county carried bones—sun-bleached buffalo bones picked from the fields, then sold to sugar refineries as a bleaching agent, and to fertilizer plants.

The Hi-Line follows, roughly, the 48th parallel through the county. The population density is less than one person per square mile. Los Angeles County, by comparison, crowds almost 2,300 people in each square mile. Phillips County was formed in 1915, carved out of two surrounding counties during the last of Montana’s homesteading boom. After World War II the economy was given a boost by extraction, production and agriculture. Since at least 1920, though, when 9,311 people lived in Phillips County, its population has been in decline. The 2000 census puts the count at 4,600, an 11 percent decline since the 1990 census. As the population dwindles the percentage of the elderly increases. In the United States, those over 65 years old make up about 13 percent of the population. In contrast, in this rural county, 18 percent of the residents are older than 65. The oldest of these, to younger locals and to each other, are the old-timers. Ask them about the weather and you will hear of a man struck by lightning. Ask for directions and you will hear no street names, but will know the number of rolling hill crests to climb and bends to curve around to reach your destination. Ask about Fort Peck Dam, and you will
learn what is now under water: an old homestead, Lover's Lane, a trail once lined with
cottonwoods and willows and wild roses, alfalfa fields planted in the riverbed's elbows,
the bends of the Missouri River that ran like a snake across the county's southern border.
And at the blunt edge of the stories of parts of their lives now flooded under, you will
hear longing.

With a historically light rainfall and poor soil, and a declining and aging
population, Phillips County is, in general, representative of the Western Great Plains.
John Wesley Powell argued in the late 19th century that the arid West should be divided
differently than more temperate farm land in the East. Water rights, he reasoned, should
be allotted along with acreage. His advice went unheeded. The homestead acts distributed
to settlers equal parcels of land, and failed to manage the distribution of water. Inequities
resulted. And, some say, land that never should have been farmed at all was exploited and
finally ruined. Some conservationists believe that farmers and ranchers should relinquish
the land—via conservation groups or the federal government—to the golden eagles,
buffalo and sagebrush that can thrive in the harsh clime. Some of the younger generations
accept this idea as the most logical use of the inhospitable environment that is the
Western Plains. Many others, however, feel betrayed.

Old-timers who rely on the land for their livelihood believe that land management
policies, food prices, and nature's fickleness will soon cripple their way of life. Some do
not believe the future holds room for farmers and ranchers at all. If the rural community
is in jeopardy, so then, some believe, are the traits and characteristics of those who
comprise it. Over a century ago, Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the "American
Personality"—strength and self-reliance—emerged at the intersection between humanity
and the frontier. At less than one person per square mile, Phillips County is, by Turner’s standards, unsettled frontier. Here, despite mounting challenges, live some of the last vestiges of Turner’s American Personality. This is the new rural America, where members of a diminishing generation live out their lives in a place as dear to them as their children who have left for an easier life.

A 94-year-old woman will ball her fingers into a tight fist and shake it at you from her wheelchair. Combs secure May Grimsley’s white hair above her pixie face—smooth light skin, small mouth and high cheekbones. Though her features are delicate, her demeanor is not—especially when it comes to the prairie dog. If any story most clearly illustrates the tension over land use, and the animosity between the environmentalists and farmers and ranchers, it’s the return of the prairie dog. “They’re nothing but a weasel,” says Grimsley. She says “weasel” as if the word burns her tongue, as if enough contempt might drive a whole colony of the rodents scurrying for their deepest burrows. For those who worked the land in Phillips County, the prairie dogs were their nemesis. The “dogs” clawed holes into the ground into which their cattle and horses could trip and break a leg. They carried disease. And, maybe most unforgivably, the prairie dogs ate the grass the ranchers sorely needed for their cattle.

The rodents are also hated because they represent changing priorities for the land. Conservation groups would like to see the animal restored because the endangered black-footed ferret uses the prairie dogs’ underground tunnels as a home, and the animals themselves for food. In 1994, Fish and Wildlife reintroduced the ferret to the Charlie M.
Russell National Wildlife Refuge. Groups like The Nature Conservancy are purchasing land that was formerly used for farming or ranching. As the prairie dogs reestablish colonies, old-timers see their hard work being undone. In the 1930s, the county paid Betty Hardin Ulrich's father and a crew to ride the country on horseback and eliminate the rodents. "By hand they dropped poisoned oats in every hole. It was work. They worked all summer," says Ulrich, 85, paging through an album of black and white pictures. "They got rid of every prairie dog and it cost the county thousands of dollars. And now they're preserving the dumb things."

She flips to a photo of prairie dogs, fat and supine against dirt. They're dead. "Those," she says, "are good prairie dogs." The pictures show dogs her dad poisoned. But like Grimsley, Ulrich was a good shot with a .22.

To the old-timers, prairie dogs and people are incompatible land dwellers. That some people prefer the rodents to farmers and ranchers is not only disheartening, it is a flagrant display of ignorance. Without those willing to work the land, they believe, the rest of us might go hungry.

Clay Straus Jenkinson, a North Dakotan who is author of Message on the Wind, writes, "I never permit myself to forget—for an instant—that the people of the Great Plains are producing our food supply." Phillips County residents, though, feel invisible as food producers. The Blatters—Ike, Katie, and their son, Mitch—raise 300 head of Charolais, a meaty white French breed. They also eat Charolais meat twice a day. Ike Blatter eats his meat raw. "If you'd eat enough raw meat," he says, "you wouldn't need all those vitamins."
The animals are fed vitamin A supplements after the winter, and barley, wheat and alfalfa. They eat haylage, an iron-rich concoction that smells faintly like sweet raisins. So the Blatters know where their meat comes from, but are frustrated because they think consumers either don’t know or don’t care. Just ask the younger generation where they get their groceries and milk, says Ike Blatter. He mimics their answer in a voice thick with sarcasm: “Go to the Safeway.” He wishes people would make the connection between a field full of cows and the hamburgers they thanklessly consume.

Katie Blatter hopes that their land will continue to produce cattle in the future. Though her husband sees his job, in part, as feeding the whole world, he says it’s hard to convince the younger generations to farm. You “haven’t got any arguments in your favor,” he says. People can find decent-paying jobs that don’t require working from sunup until sundown seven days each week.

Ed Darby is the Farm Service Agency loan officer for Phillips County. Farming and ranching might be sustained if the residents were allowed to make a living wage, Darby says. Instead, they’re paid not to produce. They’re paid to leave land fallow. For the past three years, he estimates, the FSA has been the only profit source for farmers and ranchers, who would otherwise break even at best. In 2001, his office paid out almost $15 million to the county. In Europe, he says, which has a history of famine, it’s different: “They value their farmers.” Land in Phillips County, he says, is valued for recreation and open space, something he says simply represents society’s changing values. But one thing, he thinks, won’t change: “Government policy is cheap food,” he says. “Always has been, always will be.”
Grimsley and her daughter Seel agree and see consequences. "We’re feeding people cheap food, but at the expense of farmers and ranchers," says Seel. One day, says her mother, "they’re going to wake up and find out they don’t have this food."

If farming and ranching were easy or lucrative, the people might forgive those who disregard their role in producing food. But old-timers coax food from and raise healthy cattle on land that resists. Drought is a challenge. Water is treasured. It is no coincidence that the county’s namesake was a man who was an expert in claiming—and monopolizing—water. Benjamin Daniel Phillips, commonly known as B.D., was one of the largest sheep ranchers in the area. Gene Barnard, a local who served as the Historical Society’s president for 25 years, says that B.D. would ask his employees to file along sections of one creek. Then, says Barnard, he would purchase the rights and land from his workers, thus putting water rights under his control. It’s doubtful, though, he says, whether his employees were compensated. B.D. ’s ethics may have left something to be desired, but he also left one desirable legacy. Today, says Barnard, some of the man’s irrigation systems are in use.

When the Hutterites, a pacifist, Anabaptist group, formed the East Malta Colony, Lydia Hafer says her brother would watch the sky for clouds every day. Over a 30-year period, the average rainfall in Malta has been 13 inches. Last year, the rainfall was 11.72 inches, over one inch short of average. In 2001, and also in 2000, less than nine inches fell. Ten years ago, over 15 inches fell, but there haven’t been enough rainy years to offset the dry ones.
Depending on whom you ask, the drought has lasted five years, or ten, or fourteen. The Blatters’ cutter bees, which pollinated their alfalfa, died ten years ago from lack of water. Winston Mitchell has seeded for five years but has not seen a crop come up. For the past three years, Ike Blatter has been able to see the bottom of his reservoir, and he has had to reduce his herd the past two years.

In their home, Katie and Ike Blatter pray and gives thanks for rain. “When it gets to where everybody’s hurting,” says the rancher, “The church will pray for rain.”

Betty Hardin Ulrich sips her coffee, flips pages in a photo album, each black and white photo carefully labeled, and she talks. Then, she asks a question: “Are you an environmentalist?”

She wasn’t the only one asking, and this wasn’t the only question. Are you a vegetarian? (A Montana Stockgrowers’ sign along the Hi-Line alerts travelers that they are now entering east-central Montana, and commands them to “Eat Beef.”) Are you a tree-hugger? (Well even if you are, says one, there aren’t many trees around here to hug; it’s true that there is more sky than anything.) The questions, if you are from another area—especially “that” side of the mountains, Western Montana, the left side geographically and politically—are not uncommon.

People who make their living from the land feel squeezed by environmentalists and over-regulated by politicians—by outsiders. “They’re trying to put the rancher out of business,” Ulrich says. “The environmentalists are.” Federal politicians may have book learning and may know the land by lines drawn and spaces colored on a map. What they don’t know are the bushels of vegetables grown that helped keep neighbors alive, the
narrow bands of cottonwood that shelter cattle during storms, nor the number of family
members buried there.

To scrape a living from the land here is an act both literal and figurative. It is the
federal government, an outsider, that decides how many acres a farmer plants and leaves
fallow, and how many—or how few—head of cattle can graze where, and the price per
head of grazing on leased BLM land. “I wish they had a chance to try to make a living
with all their rules and regulations,” says Faye Seel.

That an outsider, an absentee landlord, can dictate terms on land the old-timers
lived and breathed is to them an insult. “If you’re making your living off of the land,
you’re going to take care of it,” says Ulrich. “We took care of our land. They don’t have
to come from Washington and tell us how to conserve.” What she and the other old
timers don’t understand, she says, is that many people believe that Montana is the last
best place but fail to understand why: “Who has taken care of Montana all these years?”

Cranston Hawley, an Assiniboine, owns land on the Fort Belknap Indian
Reservation, west of Phillips County. About 40 years ago, he was still growing wheat to
feed his cows. He received a letter from an organization (now the Farm Services Agency)
that carefully monitored the farmers. The letter informed him that he had overseeded by
10 acres. If he disagreed, officials were going to come to his property and remeasure the
land. And they planned to charge him $10 for the trouble. At the time, says Hawley, $10
was worth what $100 or $150 dollars is worth today. “I knew I wasn’t wrong,” he says.
He drove to the headquarters in Chinook and told them to pull out their maps. He showed
them they had forgotten a row of cottonwoods, where they said that he was growing. And
because he had made the correction, he asked them for $10. He knew he would be
denied, but the denial opened the door for negotiation: “I’m going to make you a deal,”
he remembers telling them: “You stay the hell off my place, and I’ll stay the hell out of
your office.” He vowed never to raise another kernel of grain.

Merrimae Solberg is not an old-timer, but she collects their things. She was born
about 90 miles west of Malta, and has lived in the county, just north of Malta,
since she was married at 18. She is not, however, considered a local. Locals, says one,
must be born there. Having an ancestor buried in the city cemetery makes you a local,
says another. Despite her outsider status, for the past five years Solberg has served as
curator of the Phillips County Museum, which sits along the Hi-Line. As Solberg points
out the artifacts that pay tribute to the county’s past—beaded baby moccasins, lace
wedding gowns, worn leather chaps and the paleontological wonder, a baby duck-billed
dinosaur named Leonardo—she shares stories of the present. The Prairie Foundation
recently bought some land in the south country near the Charlie M. Russell National
Wildlife Refuge, commonly called the CMR. A man from the foundation walked through
the museum one day, she says, and told her he watched the land listed for sale for three
years before purchasing it. During that time, he told her, no one stepped in to buy it for
agricultural use. Buying land for agricultural use, it seems, is a questionable investment.

There are young people who want to stay home and farm, says Solberg, but the
economic opportunities are elsewhere. In order for farms or ranches to survive, she
explains, they must continually grow, and purchase neighboring land. Fewer and fewer
younger people can afford to do so. Now, in the museum, she says that the next
generation might see a big change in this part of rural America: "Phillips County," says Solberg, "will probably be one big bird and game refuge."

The Grimsley family owns land in the Sun Prairie Flats, in the southeast portion of the county, and Seel has a similar prediction for her family's land: "Ours will probably be part of the CMR someday," she says. "I think it’s sad...Then, there's no people left, there's no economy, there's no nothing." It isn't that people are opposed to the CMR. Solberg, in fact, makes an annual trip to hear 1,000 elk bugling. Every year, she says, without fail, she gets tears in her eyes. Old-timers aren't against preserving the natural beauty of the land and its inhabitants, either. They wish they could believe the future held room for their way of life, too.

Is it a betrayal to say that Jack Busche smashes newborn kittens into the cement? It is easier to kill them when their eyes are unopened, he says. He is blind, too. He is 86 ("I think"), diabetic and lives alone in Saco. As he tells stories, haltingly, hot stale air blows from the furnace, and the sickly sweet smell of tobacco wafts from his mouth. The mouth belongs to a shy man. He doesn't smile much. I listen, hard. These days, in the afternoon, he drinks a pint or two at a bar in town. He tried to split up bar time equally between the two bars in town, but stopped going to one because the owner didn't know how to tend bar—always on the phone, neglecting customers. "When you're on that side [of the bar]," he says, "you're supposed to listen to people's troubles." Busche makes an oblique suicide reference: "I used to have a gun, but now I can't kill myself or anybody else." He seems to think thoughts of suicide are commonplace "when you get low." After
all, a neighbor down the street killed himself. Old age, he says, isn’t what it’s cracked up to be. Neither was being young.

He is legally blind, and if he holds the wisdom of Tieresias, he keeps it to himself. Nudged for some small detail about what fading vision feels like, he balks. I’m not offended; me, a perfect stranger, wanting private answers. But who does hear the stories? A large poster hangs above the phone, with names and numbers hand-written in thick black marker. He doesn’t call those people, he says. All his life, in or near Saco, and one friend who visits him—a new neighbor. One sister who calls from California. One woman who is paid to sort his mail, pay his bills, check his insulin. A nephew and his wife came from Los Angeles for a visit for his birthday, but Busche says their excursions together were exhausting, cloudy days that meant he couldn’t see. His relatives have left, but with a flashlight, he pores over their pictures. In town, the senior center offers some society, but his description offers little solace: “Somebody dies and they leave an empty seat there. Nobody mentions them. They’re just gone and forgotten.”

We leave his home slowly, wishing various versions of farewells and so longs. A careful, drawn out departure. Still, though, he lingers in the doorway, waving, noting the weather, asking where the truck is parked. Waving.

He isn’t lonely, he says.

He may not be lonely, but isolation is an undeniable reality in rural America. Many people went insane because of the extreme isolation, says the historical society’s secretary. In the museum, with a collection of old, brittle newspapers, is the first issue of The Enterprise, May 13, 1899: “Mrs. Jarvis, who died from a fit of temporary insanity, during the flood was buried here.”
In 1987, a journal called *Planning* printed an article titled “The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust.” In it, Rutgers University researchers Deborah Epstein Popper and Frank J. Popper predict that the Western Great Plains will soon be deserted. Their paper calls for the federal government to step in a “deprivatize” the region, and relocate most of the residents. Then, the master plan: “The federal government’s commanding task on the Plains for the next century will be to recreate the nineteenth century, to reestablish what we would call the Buffalo Commons.” Though this proposal is fifteen years old, it still elicits derision from those who ally themselves with the rural population.

The Rural Policy Research Institute’s Web site publishes a weekly column by Thomas D. Rowley. In an April 2003 commentary regarding the New Homestead Act, Rowley shares that two rural policy leaders “agree that [the Act is] not the whole answer, but... a good start in reversing rural decline and revitalizing economies.” Then Rowley drops the punchline: “At any rate, it’s a lot better plan for the Great Plains than was the last big idea for the region—the Buffalo Commons. Unless, of course, you’re a bison.”

Phillips County residents, too, have a couple recommendations for the authors including restricting them to a buffalo diet (or denying them beef), and asking them to find honest jobs. If the old-timers’ reactions are bitter, it is probably because they again feel undervalued for their work. After all that they have done to eke a living out of the land, tame it, that the rest of us might eat, they see this proposal as shameful.

In the 1984 edition of *Out of Our Past*, Carl Degler discusses the differences between urban and rural characteristics. He then says, “If the United States continues to fall under the influence of the city—as everything seems to suggest it will—then these urban characteristics will become increasingly descriptive of American life as a whole.”
In “The American Personality,” Turner argues in 1893 that the traits the pioneers summoned stem from their encounter with nature’s raw savagery as they pushed West.

“The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.”

If the frontier is the source of what constitutes the uniquely inventive American, the rural Americans are the closest vestige of our contact with our roots, our original identity. We may be culturally impoverished without them, and in one sense, perhaps an American heritage is orphaned. What is at stake if the rural community disappears? A tightly knit community; a certain breed of toughness and independence; people who still know an intimate connection to the land.

Just over 200 people live in Saco, which sits on the Hi-Line, on the eastern end of the county. When a train called the Empire Builder (the nickname of railroad magnate James J. Hill) derailed nearby in 1988, the town population more than doubled for one day. The locomotives carried 368 people and 12 cars, including a sleeper car with no working toilets. The engineer saw a “sunkink” on the tracks—heat had warmed a section of the rail into an awkward and dangerous curve. He shouted a warning and applied the brakes, but it was too late. Eleven cars derailed. Two of the attendants refused to help passengers exit the train, choosing instead to remove baggage. But an accident report says that nearly the entire community of Saco came with blankets, food and water.
A community that bands together, and the train, are an ever-present part of the story of Phillips County. Towns along the Hi-Line were born because of the train. As the railroad stretched west, towns along the newly laid track were promoted from “section numbers” and given names. In 1889, a blindfolded railroad employee spun the globe, and placed his finger on Havre, France; Harlem, New York; the island of Malta; Saco, Maine; Glasgow, Scotland. So still, along Montana Highway 2, the signs read Havre, Harlem, Malta, Saco, Glasgow.

Malta is the county seat, a town with 2,200 people. Here, Amtrak stops just across the street from the Great Northern Hotel, which used to serve as the town’s community center. Still, every morning, a group of six to ten men—gray hair, baseball caps—crowd around a table at the café and talk. Perhaps strangers feel the small town’s gravitational pull as well. Train passengers sometimes disembark in Malta out of caprice rather than any kind of forethought. Arlys Spear runs the hotel, and more than one guest, she says, has admitted to stepping off the train in Malta “just ‘cause.” One East Coaster hopped the train to run away from his wife. He boarded at the GN Hotel. His wife stepped off the train three months later and they both left. Historian Gene Barnard recalls asking a homesteader how he ended up in Malta, Mont., and he remembers the man’s reply. He was at a New York ticket booth, heading west: “‘The guy ahead of me bought a ticket to Malta, and that sounded good.’”

And some people stay, perhaps because this is a community intimate with its members. One woman, on her deathbed, told her husband whom to marry when she died. He heeded her advice and was married to the second wife for 35 years, until she, too, died. When neighbors on the East Malta Hutterite Colony, or Fort Belknap Indian
Reservation, see smoke from a prairie fire, they set aside feuds and come with their water trucks. The interdependence isn’t only for emergencies. Branding cattle is done collectively. It is labor-intensive work that used to entail roping every single animal. Each weekend, the families—the labor force—would brand at a different ranch. Traditionally, the host family—the wife—would cook a meal in gratitude. By the end of the season, every ranch’s branding would be complete. The connections between community members is not something people take for granted. Residents are proud to tell you that such a small group can, for instance, raise enough money with a pancake feed to help a neighbor with steep medical bills.

As much as people rely on each other for support, there is also a fierce independence that in one sense, is valued above life itself. The home health office bears witness to this. Janice Reichelt, who was born and raised in Malta, directs the home health office of the Phillips County Hospital, which serves the entire county. She has administrative duties, but she goes on home visits herself and sees patients. “Those of us who have some roots…we’re not taking care of [patients] because of a paycheck. We’re taking care of them because they’re old friends.” Many elderly lose their lives in a struggle to maintain their independence. “We have had a lot of suicides because it’s an old way of thinking,” she says. “‘If I’m not able to take care of myself, I’d rather be dead.’” One woman who recently came under her care was so determined to take care of herself, Reichelt says, she was starving herself to death.

Tough is a word you hear a lot when talking about old-timers. May Grimsley, reminiscing about a photo where she and some friends were on horses, wearing
cowboy hats, says, "We looked like, I don't know what you'd call it, toughies anyway."

Before electricity, Lucille Mitchell remembers holding her baby's bottle close to her chest at night to keep it from freezing. Betty Hardin Ulrich earned a saucy moniker, Rattlesnake Red, from her long red hair, and from stomping rattlesnakes to death with her boots. When people reminisce about the lives of homesteaders, you hear the same word: tough. Homesteaders, says one local cattle buyer, were people who had to stack their dead children like cordwood during a winter flu epidemic, waiting for the ground to thaw.

A historical report written for the county's railroad jubilee celebration tells a story of what happens to those who cannot acclimate. In 1893, the owner of the first saloon in Saco brought his wife from the Deep South "who felt as though she was out of civilization." Her sister came to live with her. One of the southern belles—the report isn't clear which—died of pneumonia shortly thereafter, and her grave was the first one dug in Saco. To the railroad workmen arriving at the end of the line and feeling, the report says, "they had come to the end of the world," the train conductor shared parting words: "Prepare to meet your God."

Cranston Hawley, one of the toughest characters, was prepared to meet the tax man. From a small trailer where Hawley, 75, stays during calving and lambing season, he points out certain buildings on his ranch: an old homestead house, unused; the place where an old chicken coop stood, unused for years, and the location of a summer kitchen, unused, that was attached to the house. These structures, he says, were all decrepit. The tax appraiser, however, began sketching the lay of the land, and the unused buildings, in a notebook. Hawley saw him beginning to assess the value of the land and the taxable value of the existing, yet empty, buildings. He told the man the buildings were not in use.
The man disagreed. Hawley pulled a book of matches from his pocket. “I’ll burn ‘em up right now here in front of you,” he remembers telling the tax man. The tax man relented, finally, but, says Hawley, “he damn near got to see a fire.”

His gravelly, low-pitched, voice lulls and captivates. It betrays his hard-drinking, smoking lifestyle, though not his soft heart. Ranch work dictates both a hard, solitary independence, and a reliance on a neighbor for help with tasks like pulling cows that have fallen through the ice into the Milk River. With Hawley, the independence shows itself as a bold streak, earned from holding on to what was his own, the same way he held his first silver dollar in his fist. “I remember hanging on to that thing thinking the wind might blow it out of my hand.” And from growing his own herd. His dad helped. “In 1937,” he says of his dad, “he gave me a heifer calf. That’s where I started. One heifer calf.” After 42 years, he had built up his herd to 300. Then, in 1979, brucellosis hit. All but 61 had to be shipped and slaughtered. He had learned to manage his finances, though. As a child, he learned his coin could purchase more food if spent on a pickled pig’s foot than a candy bar.

He keeps lambs, though a couple years ago it cost him more to shear than the wool brought. And the lambs have natural enemies, he says. Once, he found an eagle’s nest and at the bottom of it, a pile of lamb bones. Coyotes will eat them, too. And dogs. Whereas a coyote will kill for food—eat and run—domestic dogs in packs will kill for sport. People who own the dogs, he says, will not believe this. He says that one dog alone won’t do it. Three or four will. Over 35 years, the dogs have killed around 300 head of sheep, he says, and “that’s a very conservative number I’m giving you.” Over the same time-period, coyotes have killed fifty. The dogs run his sheep into the river so they
drown. He’s encountered baby lambs with their throats torn open, wind pipes dangling, the back of their heads removed, their innards dragging on the ground. “Some of them I have had to shoot myself because they were torn up so bad,” he says. When he figured out it was neighbors’ pets, he went around door to door: “If your dog comes over across the river, I’m gonna kill him.” No neighbor opposed him, and in two years, he had killed every neighbor’s dog.

Well, every dog except one. He was a basset hound that liked to tromp along the other side of the river, ears dragging, baying. Hawley likes to mimic the small hound, and his imitation howling isn’t bad. One day, though, the harmless dog ran into bad company. The hound befriended a larger dog, and together they traveled onto Hawley’s land. Hawley shot and killed the larger dog. Afterward, he looked at the droopy-eared hound: “Hell, I can’t kill that little bugger.” He liked listening to him howl across the river, but he didn’t want the dog on his property again. He decided he would just “burn his tail off.” He fired. The dog flipped end over end, which scared Hawley: “I’m going to have to finish him. Kind of hurt my feelings.” But the dog was just stunned; Hawley really had just nipped the tip of his tail. The dog ran away howling. He called the neighbor. “I just killed your big dog,” he told him, but let him know he’d spared the little one. “It wasn’t his fault, really,” he says.

Like many other ranchers, he does not see wealth in his land ownership: “What I’m worth don’t mean a damn thing.” Hawley believes the land offers him something to pass on to his children, but not wealth to fall back on. “I’ve been here all my life,” he says, looking out the window of his trailer. “Kinda like this place.”
Visible from the trailer's window are the Bear Paw mountains, which etch an uneven horizon. "This land is not for sale," says Hawley. "I spent a lifetime trying to hold it all together... I want it to stay the Hawley ranch."

Love of land is universal with farmers and ranchers. Now, at the kitchen table, Winston Mitchell leans over a BLM map and traces the outlines of his land with a yellowed fingernail. He has added a magic marker color key to the map, and colored in the blocks that are his family's: black for Ruby, blue for Lyman, orange for Fritz, red for Ramsey, Green for Lucille's folks, pink for his Dad. Many land owners, or former land owners, collect old maps. They hang on the walls, sit in file drawers, and they're scribbled on, folded and worn. He shows me where one small corner of a block is carefully not colored. This, he explains, is a parcel with a good spring running through it and another man filed on it first. But he has found water on his own land. Winston Mitchell knows how to witch for water, and he stretches his hand, as if holding the instrument—a crowbar, or a split willow—and demonstrates how it would tip if the water underground called to it.

The Mitchells—Winston and Lucille—have been married since '49—an easy number to remember, he says, because the brand for the ranch is 7x7. They lived there without electricity, or telephones, or running water, and they have shared the 3,000 acres with fox, badger, mountain lion and elk. Now they live there with two of their sons, and their families. They have plenty of "fair-weather" visitors who like to hunt on their land, but not in the winter. Then, there is no reason to come to this place, which Winston Mitchell calls "just one of the ends of the world."
The past five years, though he has seeded, he has not had any wheat to combine. They’ve looked for diamonds on the land and found garnets. They’ve drilled for oil and discovered warm water. But the elk are plentiful, hunters and conservationists eager to purchase or rent the land, and the couple knows that if they sold it, they could travel around the world. It really isn’t an option. Winston Mithcell says he believes in leaving something for his children. “I’m sure I’m sitting on something real good,” he says.

On a tour of the ranch, he drives in fishtails through deep snow—eight inches, he guesses. The sun sets and throws a pink glow behind an old threshing machine sitting on a hill. The cows are in the corral, but a couple bulls stand in the field. Then, his destination. When he was in the hospital, he says, he used to dream about a certain rock cliff you can see from here. There, he could build a hunting lodge on its edge for his friends.

The cliff, the surrounding land are beautiful. He smiles and says that ten thousand years from now, if the world still exists, they’ll know who owned his land.

Farmers and ranchers are often approached by wealthy city folks asking to rent out their land for a couple weeks during hunting season, says Merrimae Solberg. They can make quite a bit of money doing this, but her husband just won’t do it. Why not? She smiles and shakes her head.

It may be lucrative, but perhaps it isn’t wise letting go.

Fred Itciana, a retired French Basque sheep herder, recently sold the largest sheep ranch in the county. Though he has four or five wool shirts hanging in his closet, most people just don’t want as much wool anymore, he says. He had thousands of acres in the
country and now he lives on one city plot. Does he miss being on the ranch? He shakes his head no. His wife looks at him. Then back. She purses her lips. Finally, she says she doesn’t believe him. He admits that he drives back often, to “spy” on his neighbors and to see what The Nature Conservancy, which purchased his ranch, is doing. They’re restoring the prairie dogs, for one.

Katie Blatter heard that Itciana sold his land to the Conservancy, and she doesn’t believe he has slept well since.

Betty Hardin Ulrich’s land had a hold on her that was almost as strong as the wine she drank to forget about losing it. One year, her dad died. Then, her only sister, Mae. The following year, it was her husband, Rex, whose pictures hang on her walls, though she probably can’t make them out too well on account of her failing vision. She tended the loss with wine she made from chokecherries, or rhubarb or dandelion blossoms—from just about anything, she says. But losing three family members within two years wasn’t the hardest thing: “Giving up the ranch, I think, was worse than losing family.”

She lives in town now. The only reason she can afford her home, she says, is because her daughter and son-in-law now pay the real estate taxes on it. She might have had to move into an apartment. But the wild rose bushes in her yard are from the Missouri Breaks. Up until a couple years ago, she had cut her Christmas tree there every year. “The remark I made when I was losing my eyesight is, ‘I won’t be able to see my pretty pine trees.’” When she dies, she will return there. She wants her ashes split: Half to be buried with her husband, Rex, and half scattered over her beloved Breaks.

Ulrich played the accordion, but her thick arthritic fingers aren’t up to the job anymore. It’s not hard to imagine that there is a still a wild streak in her that might
venture to gamble the rest of her life away for one more day on a fast horse, no fences, hot sun with her hair flying behind her, riding fast for a cool stream or simply for the thrill of riding.

Betty and Ike and Katie and Winston and Lucille and May and the others live and survive still, but around them businesses slow down and close. Fifty years ago it was different.

"I miss the trees here," says George Lamb, 77, from his office at the Malta granary, which he owns. But he loves the absence of trees, too. Coming home from the war, he drove from Seattle to Saco. "It felt pretty good to hit the prairie where you could see something."

In 1946, he returned to a town that was thriving. "There was a lot of things going on. The gas company was drilling wells. They had a pretty good size crew that'd drill 24 hours a day. The railroad had a branch that ran from Saco to Whitewater...There was lots of rebuilding after the war."

In 1955, the Great Northern Railway Co., together with Malta, produced a report that touted the growing county to outsiders. In Montana, between 1945 and 1955, reads the report, "the average number of employees for the major industries increased approximately 50%." A discussion about water says "there is reason to believe that an unlimited supply is available." The report further entices: "Some fairly large planes have landed." The population in the county is estimated at 6,000, and growing. The report describes an optimistic county embracing its own future with all its seemingly inexhaustible resources.
“At one time, in Saco, we had a movie theater, about five bars, seven filling stations, three grocery stores, three restaurants,” Lamb remembers. “Today, we’ve got one grocery store, one filling station, one restaurant that is for sale, no theater. Town is just disappearing.”

He sees a similar phenomenon 28 miles west: “You go around Malta…you’ll find a lot of vacant buildings.”

Lamb lives outside of Saco, and purchased the granary in Malta at the age of 60 after managing Saco’s granary for 26 years. “I was tired of working for somebody else,” he explains. “Don’t you ever want to work for your own self? So I bought this place.”

The empty buildings and a disappearing town don’t disturb Lamb. “We can look forward to the small community and just accept it,” he says. The hustle and bustle of a larger, growing town isn’t something he craves. He’s had a life’s share of people already. He won’t mind a quieter life, he says, after “rubbing shoulders with people day in, day out, for 50 years.”

In what the locals refer to as the south country, land near the Missouri Breaks, is a place that was called Spirit Mountain a long time ago. The mountain gave the Indians medicinal plants, and visions. Then, gold was discovered, and in the late 19th century, the government threatened to withhold food rations if those on Fort Belknap refused to sell. On the map of Phillips County, the lines that demarcate the county’s western border take a slight dogleg in its southwestern corner and wrap around the mountain. For $9 an acre, the mountain was included in the county.
In the late 1970s, Pegasus Gold Inc. began cyanide heap-leach mining. This venture would first boost, then finally devastate the local economy, and create environmental nightmares for both county residents, the state and the original landowners on Fort Belknap. It is not unlike other cyanide mining ventures. Beginning in 1982, over the course of 14 months, the pits leaked cyanide nine times. Once, 52,000 gallons escaped. Later, a big horn was found dead. Then a deer. And birds. In the mid-'80s, three heap-leach pads collapsed and leaked cyanide. Groundwater was contaminated. The company was fined by the Bureau of Hardrock Minerals and the U.S. Mine and Safety and Health Administration, and it was sued by the state, the local tribes and the EPA. Finally, in 1998, Pegasus declared bankruptcy. The company paid less than half of the cost of the total approved clean-up plan: $63.5 million. Its executives, however, ran away with $5 million.

Cyanide heap-leach mining is now banned in Montana. Some old-timers see the ban, and the mine closure, not as a victory for the county and state, but as one more hit for the rural community. The mines contributed 12.8 percent to the county tax base in 1996, two years before Pegasus declared bankruptcy. And it provided jobs.

“It’s not that I’m such a mine fan,” says Solberg, but “it’s terrible to think how many people have had to leave.” The closing, she says, has taken 280 families out of this community. Some old-timers do not believe the ground and water were damaged from the mine at all.

Small businesses close, too. Bud and Alice Phillips own and run the Cowboy Bar in Dodson, 17 miles west of Malta. It’s a rough bar, the locals say. Alice Phillips
prays for an hour every morning and keeps a rosary curled in her pocket. Bud Phillips packs a gun. He is a short, sturdy 90-year-old who speaks loudly, swears liberally, and listens with his ears and eyes both. “Bud Phillips is a lot tougher guy than you think he is,” he says. “I’ve thrown a lot of cowboys out of that bar.” This is not hard to believe: he’s spent 60 years at it.

It’s harder to imagine that in the back room of the bar, Alice Phillips raised four children. Now, along the walls, Jesus peers from four pictures and one hologram at clear trash bags of compressed Budweiser cans. Not as many cans as last year, though.

“This year, business started to slow down,” she says. “I don’t know if it’s [Bud Phillips’] age or the economy all over.” She worked the bar, too, but last year, she says, the Lord sent a cocker spaniel to trip her and break her ankle—a sign that she was supposed to quit. She wishes her husband would quit, too. The bar is for sale. He’s asking too much for it, she says, $50,000, so she hopes for a sucker. “We wished we’d get somebody come along and feel sorry for him,” she laughs. “He makes me really nervous when he counts his money. He takes it out of the till…” she pretends to move bills from one hand to the other, palms opening and closing in slow motion.

Alice Phillips hopes that if someone does buy the business, which is just big enough for a Keno machine, a poker machine, a jukebox, three small booths and one pool table, they’ll fix it up.

In a corner of the bar, bands used to play.

Some believe that it is too late to reverse the momentum built by conservationists, that the farmers and ranchers who have given their lives to this work will
eventually have to acquiesce to selling land for recreation. Some believe that there will always be a rural community, even if small. An old-time rancher like Ike Blatter, though, isn’t convinced that the current generation is resilient enough to handle the workload. People, he says, aren’t built the way they once were.

Even if all they say is wrong, one element of Montana life is constant. The rain gods are stingy. For a viable future for the rural American, residents look, albeit warily, to tourism, or the fall of the mega-farm, or—this is a stretch—the idea that the food they produce, and the work they put into it, will become of more value to society.

Currently, the Phillips County Museum houses a brachylophosaurus called Elvis, and Leonardo the hadrosaur. Across the street, another museum will soon be built dedicated solely to dinosaurs. Perhaps the public’s seeming obsession with these ancient creatures will bring enough people to the area to establish a solid tourism industry. In fact, bringing tourists to the dinosaurs is one reason Montana state senator Sam Kitzenberg gives for widening the Hi-Line into four lanes, an idea that draws caustic criticism from Western Montana.

But even if the public did flock to the displays and open their pocketbooks, change would not come without tension. To the old-timers, the dinosaurs, housed in the front room of the museum, have pushed their county’s pioneer and homestead history to the back of the building—a life-size depiction of an old country store; a collection of antique cameras; old army uniforms worn by the county residents; even hankies from France’s gratitude train, sent over after World War II. Ike Blatter relays the typical old-timer sentiment about the museum: “It’s a good place to find a bone.” And even the younger residents have doubts. Though the Jurassic Park movies were a sensation,
children keep miniature plastic T-Rexes in their pockets, and dinosaur bones have graced
the covers of the Smithsonian, National Geographic, and other national magazines, most
county residents are not eager to embrace this option. They have heard other promises
that they have seen quickly broken. Even Arlys Spear, who must believe in the economic
viability of the area enough to buy the hotel two years ago, isn’t cheerleading. As far as a
booming dinosaur industry is concerned, she says she’ll believe it when she sees it.

Janice Reichelt shares another possibility for preserving the rural community: the
fall of the mega-farm. Some farms grow too big and then fall apart. Absentee owners, not
accustomed to the daily work of tending the land, mismanage it. They lose money, and
finally, they begin to sell off land to recoup. Poised to purchase the pieces the large farms
sell are the smaller farmers. In some cases, the smaller farmers join an “association,” or a
cooperative, and purchase the land together. Reichelt has seen this happen already, so the
idea is not without merit.

If consumers were willing to pay a fairer price for food, the farmer’s and
rancher’s lifespan might also extend. Currently, says Ed Darby, raising cattle costs a
rancher 70-80 cents per pound. Last year, he says, cattle producers were fortunate to sell
for 75 cents per pound. “The lucky ones broke even,” he says. “The rest of them went in
the hole.” What the cost of production doesn’t include, however, is the cost of the land
itself, or a salary for the rancher. So one works without compensation all year, and still
owes property taxes, if not money for feed and fuel.

Remarkably, some of the elderly express little regret at the dying communities
that surround them. The pace of their lives is slipping, so perhaps it feels apt, like part of
the cycle, that the tempo of their towns slows, too. Phillips County does not make a soft
home. It is a place where air molecules can slice past in the winter at 173 mph, chill the atmosphere, freeze cattle to death. It is a place that holds a town where the cemetery had no caretaker so the neighbors dug the graves. It is a thirsty place. The land, says one rancher, is beautiful but worthless for agriculture—a jarring opposition that seems ubiquitous at this end of the world. A jagged cliff hanging over the smooth prairie; an old blind man living alone, and three generations of Mitchells on one ranch; parched fields flanking the Missouri River; the soft lines of George Lamb’s face against the metallic sheen and rigid hulk of his grain elevators; a bar that has been both a livelihood and an albatross for its owner, 90 years old. Whether it’s the strong or the stubborn, it’s hard to say, but it isn’t the weak who endure.

If revival fails, the next generation of old-timers may live elsewhere. The current octogenarians may be some of the last in this corner of rural America who know how to tell time by watching storm clouds pile up on the horizon—thirty minutes ‘til the rain runs down their own gutters—the last of those willing to swim through an icy river to save their animals, the last who understand why losing their land is even harder than losing family.

Rural life is obviously not for everyone. For many, though, especially those raised here, the land bewitches and beguiles them. Just like it did the Indians, says Ed Darby. “We took their place. We took their feeling for their land. The land does that to you,” he says. “You don’t fight this land. You come to an agreement with it to survive.” 
## Interviews

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