

Montana: The Last, Best Place?

To understand politics in Montana and the process of representation, one does not begin with people or politicians. One begins with *place*, because without place the rest does not—cannot—be made to make sense. How Montanans understand themselves, their representatives, their history, and their relationship to others—including the federal government—begins and ends with place. It is also place that presents Montanans with their greatest challenges and opportunities. To use Richard Fenno’s terminology, we must begin with the geographic constituency—not only as a physical space and place, but as a shared idea and experience. To understand Montana and Montanans, we must start with the land known variously as the Treasure State, Big Sky Country, or perhaps the most evocative: The Last, Best Place.

In this chapter, I provide the reader with a short history of Montana’s relationship to the land, its historical development, the complicated relationship it has with the federal government, and the challenges the state faces as it transitions from a resource-intensive economy to a more diverse one based upon tourism and hi-tech industries. I claim that the deep connection Montanans have with their physical surroundings shapes how they view politics, the cleavages which exist among them, and the representatives they choose to represent them. Place also dictates the representational choices members of Congress make to build trust with their constituents. In particular, members of Congress are careful to cultivate a representational style known as “one of us” with their constituents. Without a keen sense of place, it is impossible for the observer to understand and interpret governing and campaigning in Montana specifically and the West more generally.

PLACE-BASED CONNECTIONS

Late April of 2012, I drove 200 miles north to Choteau, population 1,620. Choteau sits along the Rocky Mountain front where the rolling Great Plains crash into craggy peaks. A predominately agricultural community, Choteau has witnessed the clash of cultures driven by wealthy out-of-staters moving in to enjoy access to public lands and Montana’s legendary scenery. The purpose of my trip was to witness one of the last town hall meetings Congressman Denny Rehberg conducted during the election year. The subject of the meeting was the

Rocky Mountain Heritage Act. This bill, sponsored by Senator Max Baucus and cosponsored by Rehberg's campaign opponent, Senator Jon Tester, proposed protecting public land along the front—defined as where the plains meet the mountains—from mineral development.¹ Rehberg had criticized the proposal and held the meeting to hear from constituents.² The meeting drew a large crowd, nearly filling the high school auditorium. Rehberg took comments for about ninety minutes; opinion was mixed. The meeting was generally cordial despite the intense emotions displayed.

The most interesting aspect of the meeting, and the one most telling about Montana, was the understood introductory protocol: Before addressing the Rocky Mountain Heritage Act, speakers prefaced their remarks with their family's genealogy. "Hi, Denny, I'm a fourth-generation Montanan," the native-born would say. Those not born in Montana apologized for it and struggled to make some meaningful connection. "I've only been here fifteen years" someone might say, "but my kids are both native Montanans." Bill Wyckoff, a cultural geographer at Montana State would say that it was a classic display of place identity, an expression of an historical relationship to Montana signifying that the opinions following ought to carry additional weight: "I'm deeply rooted in this place; you can trust my judgment."³ By contrast, the newcomer's opinion about Montana is, and should be, suspect.

I asked Ken Toole, himself a fifth-generation Montanan, a former state senator, and a son of the great Montana historian K. Ross Toole, about trotting out the Montana-born credential and its meaning. "I think part of it is fear and lack of security, and a desire to have a place and a spot and slot," Toole began. "But I think part of it is being proud. I mean, part of it is a positive thing. You feel like . . . you know . . . if you can make a living here, you're doing pretty well . . . I think it helps them self-identify with that Western, Marlboro Man thing."⁴

Dan Kemmis, former mayor of Missoula, author, and a native of Montana, has a slightly different take, suggesting that "it reflects an awareness that we are in fact shaped by our place, and the longer a family stays intact in a particular place, the more likely it genuinely is to have been shaped by that place."⁵ Many who have lived here all their lives feel that, like tea, Montana values and connection to place must steep into a person's soul and bones. Until that process is completed over generations, it is impossible—and imprudent—to understand and speak for Montana.

As a political scientist (and nonnative), the experience immediately reminded me of the process of representation and how members of Congress work to establish trust with constituents. In this instance, constituents signaled to their member why he, Rehberg, should trust them and their opinions. Conversely, Rehberg and Tester often signaled to Montanans that they could place trust in them

because of their own family histories and deep connection to the state. Rehberg often describes himself as a fifth-generation Montanan who is a rancher from Billings, and Tester calls himself a “third-generation Montana dirt farmer” from Big Sandy. The people of Choteau were telling Rehberg that “we” are one of “you”—the “you” being “Montana.” And because they were “Montana” as demonstrated by their lineage, what they had to say mattered.

“ONE OF US”

Political scientists often think of representation simply as a member of Congress demonstrating issue congruence with constituents.⁶ But representation is more complicated than position taking and voting on legislation; in fact, sometimes that is not even the most important piece of the representational equation. Richard Fenno reminds us that “we should not start our studies of representation by assuming [issues] are the only basis for a representational relationship. They are not.”⁷ Fenno continues, writing that “though voters want to know the policy positions of their representatives, they are equally or more interested in using issue presentations as an opportunity to judge their representative as a person.”⁸ The Choteau experience indicates the utmost importance of place in how Montanans think about representation, and the expectation that elected representatives demonstrate a connection to place through what Fenno calls their “presentations of self.” In particular, Montanans want representatives who are extensions of themselves—who present themselves as “one of us.”

The notion of “one of us” is basically an effort by members of Congress to display their connectivity to a place and a group—and through that connection, demonstrate trustworthiness. In terms of representation, a member of Congress validates the trust constituents place in him by evoking that connection to a people and a place, and in so doing “convey . . . a sense of empathy with his constituents. Contextually and verbally, he gives them the impression that ‘I understand your situation and I care about it’; ‘I can put myself in your shoes’; and ‘I can see the world the way you do.’”⁹ “One of us” is an intimate representational style because it invites constituents to trust a representative the most completely. What could be better than to have someone who is a spitting image of them, making the same decision they would when confronted with exactly the same information?

Visually, “one of us” can include the way a member dresses. Rarely, if ever, does one see a Montana politician decked out in a sharp suit and tie, sporting polished shoes. More often, they are wearing a pair of cowboy boots, a comfortable button-down oxford, and a pair of jeans. On more formal occasions, a jacket makes an appearance, but a tie? Only if it’s a bolo. In this way, “one of us” evokes

another political science concept: descriptive representation. Political scientists usually reserve this representational style to describe ethnic or gender-based representation, but the concept applies here.¹⁰ Montanans want someone reflecting them in terms of shared experience and history—and this sometimes trumps a representative who is substantively more reflective of their interests. Members may have their own ideas of how to best represent a place, but constituents impose behavioral expectations upon them; expectations which reflect the political culture and shared experiences of a common place. Place creates expectations, and in Montana, the expectation in turn doubles back to demonstrating connection to Montana and the experience of the American West.

Although representation begins in a legally constituted and bounded place, it does not end there. All members of Congress have geographical entities they represent, both a district and a state. In the case of Congressman Rehberg, Senator Tester, and Senator Baucus, together they represent the same geographic entity, Montana, on Capitol Hill. And although it is true that Montana's congressional delegation represents different groups and interests within Montana, all three work to build trust with constituents through repeated and meaningful connections to the space they share. Centrality of place lies at the heart of representation and politics in Montana, and in the American West more broadly, because it constitutes a shared meaning or understanding. Once that is understood, it makes it easier to understand the foundation for the representational choices facing Rehberg and Tester as they campaigned for reelection in 2012.

MONTANA: THE PLACE

Montana is physically imposing, remote, and beautiful. Its unofficial motto, the “Big Sky,” captures the state's immensity. The western third of the state is studded with mountains. Although not as high as the mountains in Colorado, these towering walls of granite and limestone still serve as both a physical barrier to life in the rugged West and a lifeline to everyday living. While the wonders of modern engineering have built railroads and interstate highways up seemingly impossible grades, or when necessary, blasted pathways through tunnels, the often intemperate Montana weather can make these outlets to the world impassable with wind and snow even in summer. Yet those same mountains slowly and inexorably release snowmelt that sustains life in the Treasure State. In addition to the water, the mountains contain other riches: gold, silver, platinum, copper, coal, and timber. Montana's mountains—the very word *Montana* means mountains in Spanish—have long provided both opportunities and limitations for those settling here.

The eastern two-thirds of the state is covered by the high prairie grasslands of America's Great Plains. Here one starts grasping the notion of Montana's “Big

Sky.” There are no sight lines in Jordan, Plentywood, or Big Sandy. You might see the Rocky Mountains looming far off in the distance, but more likely you will see miles of undulating grassland broken only by high, dry buttes. “High, wide, and handsome” is how journalist and historian Joseph Kinsey Howard described Montana.¹¹ The east is both high, wide, and, although some might disagree, handsome in its ruggedness and (seeming) vegetative simplicity.

It is hard to capture the state’s sheer size. Statistically, it is the fourth-largest state in the country, with more than 145,500 square miles. But what does that mean? “When you take Montana out of a map of the United States and you set one corner of Montana around Chicago, the other corner of Montana reaches almost to the Atlantic Ocean,” said former Congressman Pat Williams.¹² The drive from Montana’s eastern border, near Beach, North Dakota along Interstate 94, to Lookout Pass at the far western end of the state on Interstate 90, is almost 700 miles and takes nearly ten hours.

Montana is not the least densely populated state in the union, but it’s pretty close. According to the most recent census, there are 6.8 persons per square mile in Montana.¹³ In fact, Montana has more cows than people, with 2.6 head of cattle as of January 2013 for every person.¹⁴ But the metric best capturing Montana’s sparseness is the miles of paved roads per Montanan. At 0.15 miles per person, only North and South Dakota maintain a higher ratio.¹⁵ Montana is thinly populated, and most Montanans like it that way. When Montana reached a major demographic milestone of one million residents between November and December 2011, the Associated Press published a story about the possible psychological effects on a state that has prided itself on its lack of crowds and traffic.¹⁶

Montana is dry. “Most sectors of the West, even the high desert land of Nevada, can support agriculture, but water must be brought in: Beyond the 100th meridian (the north-south ‘dry line’ running through the middle of the Dakotas and then through Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas), annual rainfall by itself is insufficient to grow crops,” writes Charles Wilkinson, a leading scholar of natural resource policy in the American West.¹⁷ In fact, Montana is the 5th driest state.¹⁸ On the Great Plains, home of the state’s grain crops, most areas receive just 10 to 18 inches per year on average—and a few even less.¹⁹ Compare this to Indiana, blessed with some of the nation’s most agriculturally productive land, which averages more than 40 inches of precipitation. The lack of rain makes growing crops challenging and forces residents to rely upon the highly variable annual snowpack to survive through the summer and fall.

Montana’s topography has historically meant isolation. That isolation was undoubtedly mitigated to some degree by the arrival of the railroads in the 19th century, the completion of Interstate 90 in 1978, and the recent growth of regional airports with direct flights. And yet it is still more than 500 miles from

Billings, the state's largest city, to Denver. Distance from markets has added tremendous transportation costs to goods leaving the state and has historically discouraged the development of manufacturing. The first McDonald's opened for business in 1969, and while Starbucks might be a ubiquitous part of the American landscape, it has hardly made a dent here.²⁰ The first one appeared in 2003 in Billings, and another finally made its way to Bozeman in the winter of 2013.²¹ This isolation traditionally has served as an impediment to economic growth, but this view has begun to change. All places are shaped by their geography. But if the deterministic effects of geography were to be placed on a continuum from least to greatest impact on the collective fortunes of a people, Montana would exist at the extreme end. It is the land that determined both the why and the who of Montana's first settlers. The rich abundance of wildlife provided sustenance to Montana's first Native American tribes, estimated to have reached the territory more than 13,000 years ago.²² The first European settlers were brought by wildlife, too, specifically to trap beavers in the 18th and 19th centuries.²³ The next wave of immigrants sought the riches of Montana's mountains, coming in the 1860s after news of gold strikes along Grasshopper Creek and Alder Gulch made its way eastward.²⁴ The miners kept coming after silver was found in the 1870s, but it was King Copper that put Montana on the mining map. Finally, so-called "honyockers"²⁵—mostly German and Scandinavian families—followed the promises of railroad promoters and dreams inspired by the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 in hopes of claiming their 320 dry acres in eastern Montana during the second decade of the 20th century.²⁶

What tied each of these migration events together was the necessity of living off what could be hunted, mined, pulled, or grown from the land. And what came from the land was shipped elsewhere to be consumed. In Montana, it was a daily struggle to survive. Out of that struggle came an image and an identity that Montanans still venerate—the rugged individual who moved West to make his fortune with only his grit and the clothes on his back. The rugged land created rugged men and women who, through their ceaseless toils with the land became, metaphorically, one with that very land. Those who survived were to be revered because not everyone survived and not everyone stayed. "In Ireland, they have two terms for the people who come in with the high hopes the way some people come to Montana," relayed Congressman Williams over coffee. "The people who come into Ireland [and leave because they can't handle the weather], the Irish call them 'blow-ins.' The ones that stay more than five years, the Irish call them 'stickers.' Montanans have a lot more blow-ins than we have stickers."²⁷ This was especially true after severe drought and the agricultural crash of the late teens and the early 1920s. As Carroll College historian Bob Swartout reminded me, Montana "is the only state in the union—there were 48 states then—that had a smaller population

in 1930 than it did in 1920.”²⁸ The blow-ins blew out, making the stickers who stayed behind especially proud of having survived. It is a pride—and an obstinacy—that still shapes the stickers and their politics today.

MONTANA AND THE FEDS: A LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP

The mythos of the rugged individual, the cowboy on his steed that was popularized by those Marlboro Man ads in magazines, is still very much alive in the minds of Montanans. It is he who settled the West with a rope, a gun, and steely determination. But as much as Montana history is populated with colorful characters who worked their will on our destinies (and that part of history has certainly bled into the present), the federal government is the proverbial elephant in the room that is just as important to Montana’s present-day situation. Specifically, it is the incentives and disincentives the federal government creates through policy. The Marlboro Man was not as independent and self-reliant as one might believe—even if we can agree that he was gritty and tough. He was helped, encouraged, and pushed by the federal government’s policies concerning Western expansion and settlement. It is these policies, combined with the federal government’s response to the Great Depression, which forever altered Montana. What’s more, these policies determined the economic choices and decisions Montanans *can* make—whether fifth or first generation—today.

The federal government’s role in the formation of Montana and the West begins with a fact: that most of the West was—and is—owned by the federal government. Unlike the states east of the Mississippi, the great swaths of land constituting the West had been obtained by the federal government through treaties with foreign countries. And because Congress required most states admitted after the original thirteen to adopt a disclaimer clause which would renounce any state claims to federally owned lands within its boundaries, the federal government retained much of that Western land when states gained admission.²⁹

Today, a substantial portion of the eleven Western states still is owned and controlled by the federal government (see Table 2.1). Montana is actually on the lower end with less than 29 percent of land owned by the federal government. Nevada sits at the other end of the spectrum with 81 percent of the land under federal control.³⁰ This pattern of widespread federal ownership in the West exists in contrast to the Eastern states. For example, less than one-half of one percent of Connecticut is under federal supervision. In fact, east of the Mississippi, the federal government owns no more than thirteen and a half percent of the land in *any* state.³¹ Federal land policy looms large in how the West was cultivated and it remains a major source of contention among those living in the West today.

TABLE 2.1
Federal Control of State Lands in America's West

State	Federal Land Acreage	Total Acreage	Percentage of State Land
Arizona	30,741,287	72,688,000	42.3%
California	47,797,533	100,206,720	47.7%
Colorado	24,086,075	66,485,760	36.2%
Idaho	32,635,835	52,933,120	61.7%
Montana	26,921,861	93,271,040	28.9%
Nevada	56,961,861	70,264,320	81.1%
New Mexico	27,001,583	77,766,400	34.7%
Oregon	32,665,430	61,598,720	53.0%
Utah	35,033,603	52,696,690	66.5%
Washington	12,173,813	42,693,760	28.5%
Wyoming	30,043,513	62,343,040	48.2%
Western State Average			48.1%
Eastern State Average			5.0%

Note: Data obtained from Table 1: Federal Land by State, 2010. Ross W. Gorte and Carol Vincent. "CRS Federal Land Ownership: Overview and Data," Congressional Research Service, February 8, 2012.

If the bounty of the land in the form of furs, minerals, timber, grasslands, and soil initially drew immigrants and Easterners to Montana and the West, the federal government sweetened the pot—first by taking a hands-off approach and later by aiding their movement with “the most extensive program of subsidies ever adopted by any government.”³² Most central were the policies established first by custom and then enshrined in statute by the federal government beginning in the late 19th century, which still play a central role in contemporary politics today. Wilkinson calls these policies the “Lords of Yesterday.” Four of the five “Lords of Yesterday” are particularly important to understanding Montana. They include the Hardrock Mining Law of 1872, the Rancher’s Code, the Forest Service’s Organic Act of 1897, and the doctrine of prior appropriation governing water usage and rights.³³

Generally speaking, these policies encouraged individuals and corporations to use public lands for private resource extraction. To this day, individuals may submit mining claims on most public lands for gold, silver, uranium, copper, molybdenum, iron, lead, aluminum, and gemstones.³⁴ A claim includes property rights

and royalty-free hardrock elements. The claimant is only required to work the claim annually with a minimal financial commitment.³⁵ Much the same can be said about grazing on public lands. The federal government in the 19th century did not have a legal structure in place to deal with the use of public lands for private grazing, so in its absence, individual ranchers simply had their cattle help themselves to public grasslands.³⁶ The use of public lands became expected and customary; some states even created legal protections for those who grazed these lands without the federal government's permission. Federal forests were no different, essentially open for the taking through the 1880s.³⁷ Even water policy, as byzantine as it is today, was simple as to its purpose: to encourage land improvement and development with an eye toward resource extraction of agriculture, mining, or livestock.

It was the presence of gold in creek gravels that first brought miners to Montana, but the Hardrock Mining Act brought large-scale mining to Butte. As easy pickings in creek beds played out, "work focused increasingly on the more labor-intensive lode deposits—minerals embedded in quartz or other rock. . . . The higher capital requirements for lode mining, which usually required deep tunnels, brought in eastern and foreign investors, and these sophisticated capitalists held concerns about the security of their operations."³⁸ That security required clear legal title to claims that would allow investors peace of mind as they poured money in to support the necessary infrastructure. Security is what the federal government provided via the Hardrock Mining Act.

The large veins of copper running beneath Butte set Montana's destiny apart economically, politically, and demographically from its neighbors. The tale of the copper barons and the conflict between Marcus Daly and William Clark has been told elsewhere.³⁹ What is important here is the emergence of one company, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, which dominated the mining of copper in Butte, smelting in Anaconda, and refining in Great Falls from 1910 through the early 1970s. Anaconda became one of the largest industrial corporations in the world, and it exhibited nothing short of a stranglehold on the state politically.⁴⁰ It owned many newspapers, held substantial sway in the legislature, and dominated the state's economy.⁴¹ The presence of Anaconda and its mining operations also created one of the most dynamic urban centers in the West: Butte. The mines attracted Cornish, Irish, Scandinavians, and Slavic immigrants, among others, to work them. "Almost every immigrant group from around the world could be found in Montana" recalls historian Bob Swartout.⁴²

The miners of Butte were among the best-paid industrial workers in the world. Because of the mining and the need for timber and electricity, Montana had a relatively large blue collar population, one that joined labor unions and voted Democratic. All of these things were unusual in the context of the broader West,

according to Swartout. It is “very rare that a western state would have the kind of company that would wield the kind of influence that ACM would have in the state for three quarters of a century. And that has an important impact on how politics would evolve in the state, the kind of love-hate relationship Montanans have with a company the size of ACM.”⁴³ The industrialization and increasing urbanization of the western portion of the state stood in stark contrast to Eastern Montana, which—at the turn of the century—was still thinly populated by Euro-Americans and dominated by big ranches.

The major impediment to settling the West, generally, and Eastern Montana in particular, is its aridity. According to Montana historians Michael Malone, Richard Roeder, and William Lang, three factors came together to populate one of the last open frontiers in the West: “the dry farming system of agriculture, the availability of large tracts of land either free or at low prices, and the mammoth promotional campaign that cranked up around 1900.”⁴⁴ These elements together made moving to wide open, dry, and tough land plausible. The Enlarged Homestead Act offered the land for free provided it was developed for five years (modified to three years in 1912).⁴⁵ But how would settlers farm without a steady supply of water? Dry land agriculture provided the answer.⁴⁶ The Campbell system, as it was called, was prefaced by preserving as much moisture as possible in a climate with little rain and by cropping the land every other year. As described by Malone and his colleagues, “Campbell’s famous subsurface packer tamped the subsoil while loosening the topsoil. In order to maintain a fine surface mulch that would hold down evaporation, his system then called for constant discing and harrowing, especially after each rain.”⁴⁷ His system seemed to make the impossible—agriculture in a land of sagebrush and rattlesnakes—possible. For Europeans unable to obtain ownership of land and lacking opportunity in heavily stratified societies, moving to Montana was suddenly attractive.

Then the railroads came along to give newcomers another push. The railroads wanted more goods to ship to market because more goods meant more profits. Three railways dominated by James J. Hill and the Milwaukee Railroad began a promotional campaign throughout the eastern states and Europe “to publicize the fertility of the northern Great Plains and to lure farmers there.”⁴⁸ Pamphlets were scattered across Europe extolling the wonders of the Great Plains and the endless agriculture riches to be made easily. Many native-born Americans, as well as German and Scandinavian immigrants, were sold. What could go wrong?

The federal government’s policy of westward expansion fit within the larger national objective of building a robust industrial economy. Seen through this lens, the West was viewed as an endless bounty of land crucial to feeding a growing and increasingly urbanizing Eastern population, which in turn was necessary for the new factories churning out an array of consumer goods. These factories

not only needed food for workers but also materials to fashion into shovels, phonographs, carriages, and cars. They needed copper to transmit electricity for larger and more powerful generators. The West had the resources to spare. It merely needed the people to remove them and the transportation infrastructure to send them to Eastern factories.

In short, the American West served as a colonial economy of the East. Settlers stripped the land of resources, processed some, and sent most away to be finished into products. Transportation, intense labor requirements, and ready access to global markets made locating manufacturing concerns in the West prohibitively expensive, which served only to reinforce the reliance upon nature's bounty by the newly settled inhabitants of the West. Federal land policy in the West, such as it was, centered on securing the raw materials essential for economic growth and industrialization.

Federal policy concerning Native Americans grew within this broader economic picture. Native American reverence and respect for the land is anathema to resource extraction and was seen as inherently wasteful because valuable resources were left untouched and underutilized.⁴⁹ They were seen as an impediment to civilized economic development based on John Locke's labor theory of value. The legacy of this resource-based culture in all its forms, particularly the immediate and residual effects on Native Americans housed on reservations, is one with which Montana still wrestles.

As the 19th century turned into the 20th, it became clear that laissez-faire land policies had consequences which threatened the long-term sustainability of the Western economy. The land was becoming scarred and less productive in a "tragedy of the commons" *writ large*. Forests were clear cut and fires raged throughout the West. Rangeland was overgrazed and water wasted. The Progressive Era heralded productivity through management. And, as the federal government became increasingly professionalized, Congress and the bureaucracy began developing policies to manage federal land to ensure its perpetual productivity. In many ways, the Forest Service became emblematic of this movement; its founder, Gifford Pinchot, provides the clearest articulation of what later became known as "traditional conservation." According to one scholar:

The first principle of conservation is development, the use of the natural resources now existing on this continent for the benefit of the people who live here now. . . . In the second place conservation stands for the prevention of waste. . . . In addition to the principles of development and preservation [prevention of waste] of our resources there is a third principle. . . . The natural resources must be developed and preserved for the benefit of the many, and not merely for the profit of the few.⁵⁰

The progressive-inspired regulation of federal land was not to preserve wilderness in an unaltered state as desired by John Muir and his Sierra Club. It was, instead, to ensure that natural resources could be employed sustainably by industrial markets for the widest possible benefit. Pinchot, for example, felt that that preservation for its own sake was not the purpose of scientific management of forest lands: "There may be just as much waste in neglecting the development and use of certain natural resources as there is in their destruction," he wrote.⁵¹ The Forest Service, through Pinchot and the professionalization of forest rangers, saw fundamental to their mission as managers of public lands the protection of forests and grasslands to provide timber for loggers and grass for cattle in perpetuity. The notion that "wilderness is a necessity" for John Muir's "thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people" was neither a part of Pinchot's vision nor the rationale for federal land management in the early 20th century.⁵²

The boundless possibilities of Westward expansion and industrialization collapsed, however. The bountiful rains that had come to the Great Plains and Eastern Montana in the early 20th century were an aberration. A series of droughts wracked the region throughout the late teens, twenties, and thirties. Worse, the Campbell system's deep and regular plowing tore up the native grasses that had for centuries developed and protected the rich topsoil. Exposed to the high winds, much of this rich, fertile loam blew away when the rains stopped. Many of the homesteaders who had blown in blew out again in the 1920s.

The eastern portion of Montana lost population throughout the 1920s; this demographic bleeding more or less continues today save for the counties surrounding the oil development of the Bakken formation. The western portion of the state was not spared from the economic chaos, either. The collapse of copper prices worldwide precipitated layoffs in the copper mines, the smelters, and sawmills.⁵³ Montana, like the rest of the nation, fell into an economic malaise. The Great Depression had arrived.

Much of the New Deal was designed to save the resource-based market economy of the West by extending the scientific management principles laid down by Pinchot and by the progressive presidential administrations of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. The collapse of Wall Street in 1929 and the emergence of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s resulted in part from untrammelled individualism pursuing short-term profit. The solutions promulgated by FDR's administration sought to bring markets under tighter federal regulation. This extended to land policy. Overconsumption, overproduction, and an overabundance of short-term thinking at the expense of long-term planning had pushed families and the nation to the brink.

At first, the New Deal aimed to reform the resource extractive system by making it more sustainable. Emblematic is the Taylor Grazing Act passed by Congress

in 1934. The overgrazing of the plains had terrible consequences in Montana and the West in the late 1880s. The Taylor Grazing Act created local grazing districts populated with resident ranchers and overseen by the newly formed Grazing Service.⁵⁴ Grazing fees also were established and assessed along with the requirement of permits for range use. Although range management perpetually was underfunded and grazing fees kept low, the Taylor Grazing Act was an attempt—however feeble—to conserve scientifically the grasslands as a resource.⁵⁵ Just as important, the act was justified in the language of traditional conservation as it “specifically identified livestock grazing as the dominant use” of the lands subject to its regulations and management.⁵⁶ Other policies, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act, used a program of subsidies both to “reduc[e] the huge crop surpluses that glutted the market” and to allow for heavily plowed land to recover by making “direct cash benefit payments to farmers who agreed to restrict crop acreages.”⁵⁷ In both cases, Pinchot’s principles of waste prevention and the development of resources to benefit the most lay at the heart of these reform efforts.

The New Deal also helped Montana build an infrastructure to sustain a modern economy while providing jobs to needy families. Ostensibly, the goal was again to encourage and perpetuate the resource-intensiveness of Montana’s economy. Millions of dollars poured in to build roads, irrigation, and flood control projects. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) “employed over 14,000 local workers” by the middle of 1939 and “directly benefit[ed] more Montanans than any of its counterparts.” The WPA alone built “7,239 miles of highway, 1,366 bridges, 301 school buildings, [and] 31 outdoors stadiums.”⁵⁸ The Rural Electrification Administration increased by 116 percent in four years the number of farms powered by electricity.⁵⁹ Between 1933 and 1939, the federal government loaned to and spent in Montana more than \$525 million. This represented \$974 in federal loans and spending for every Montanan, the second-highest per-capita rate in federal investments in the period.⁶⁰ Clearly, Montana benefitted mightily from the New Deal.

And yet, while the New Deal provided both a safety net for Montana’s resource extraction economy and built an infrastructure to maintain it into the future, it also sowed the seeds of change. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), in particular, hinted at a different path forward. The CCC enhanced national parks and forests, building access roads, fighting forest fires, creating visitor centers, and planting vegetation.⁶¹ While these projects created short-term jobs for young unemployed men, they also created an infrastructure centered on Montana’s scenic landscape. Montanans could more easily access public lands not only for resource extraction but for recreation. Improved highways provided better access to global markets for Montana’s resources as well as tourists seeking dramatic landscapes and outdoor recreation opportunities.

Montana's relationship to the land thus far had been based upon taking for subsistence, a policy encouraged by the federal government. The New Deal, in some respects, opened another door for Montanans: living from and off the bounty of the land without taking from it. The bounty was no longer mineral, animal, or plant but rather the value of the undisturbed landscape. The possibility of a different relationship to the land also laid the groundwork for a new relationship with the federal government.

The seeds sown by the CCC began to sprout in the 1950s. After World War II, returning GIs came home to start families, build homes, and to take advantage of America's economic predominance globally. Families that had sacrificed during the War now had the time to spend and relax. Leisure time increased, and America looked for new adventures. Many found travelling America's byways became easier after the construction of the Interstate Highway system. "Outdoor recreation on federally-owned lands had exploded after World War II," according to a recent history of the Bureau of Land Management.⁶² "By the mid-1950s there was growing public concern that [the Forest Service and the National Park Service] did not have the land or resources to meet all of the future recreation demand. Visits to the national park system went from 33 million in 1950 to 79 million in 1960, and visits to the national forest system rose from 27 million to 93 million in the same period."⁶³ Many visits were to the West, which not only contained the vast majority of public land in the United States but also had landscapes dramatically different from the everyday surroundings of most Americans.

Families did more than visit the West: They moved there. Earlier migrations had been fueled by the resource economies that provided jobs. But as manufacturing and financial jobs moved West and South, reliance upon what was in the earth became less central to the economic opportunity structures. In-migration to the West brought people who loved the land because of the vistas and took advantage of the opportunity to spend their leisure hours there.⁶⁴ The land remained an asset but for what it was rather than what was in it. People, industries, and companies could now more easily move to beautiful places. As former Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer recently noted on *Late Night with David Letterman*, they were left as God removed His hand.⁶⁵

Federal land policy began incorporating this new vision of public space in the 1950s, a vision that there was value in leaving the land alone. Congress acted in 1958 by creating "the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission to (1) complete a comprehensive inventory of recreational resources and demand, (2) estimate future recreational demands, and (3) propose new strategies for dealing with outdoor recreation."⁶⁶ The recognition that recreation had value and was a legitimate use of public lands immediately brought into conflict those wedded to the traditional vision of

conservation. The old clash of visions reemerged. The preservationists now demanded inclusion in federal land decisions. The rise of the environmental movement and its early successes made that demand a reality.⁶⁷

The 1960s was the watershed decade for federal land policy. No longer was resource extraction to be the sole purpose. Now federal agencies had to consider the needs of recreationalists, who demanded preservation, as well the health of the environment and the well-being of wildlife stock. These changes began under the guidance of Interior Secretary Stewart Udall and eventually were codified in a series of laws, including the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, the Multiple Use Sustained Yield Act, and the Wilderness Act.⁶⁸ Collectively, these policies institutionalized the shift of power away from resource extraction toward other environmental considerations. In Montana specifically, the move toward a new relationship with the land and possibly a new identity can be witnessed in the preamble to the new state Constitution adopted in 1972: "We the people of Montana grateful to God for the quiet beauty of our state, the grandeur of our mountains, the vastness of our rolling plains, and desiring to improve the quality of life, equality of opportunity and secure the blessings of liberty for this and future generations do ordain and establish this constitution."⁶⁹

The rugged individualist, wedded to traditionally defined conservation and supportive of a federal policy giving institutionalized power to resource extractive endeavors, did not go quietly into the Western night. Wilkinson's *Lords of Yesterday*, which fundamentally tipped the balance in favor of commoditization of the land earlier in the century, were threatened. Testifying in front of the congressional committee considering the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, Utah state legislator Calvin Black spoke for many frustrated westerners: "We plead with you to leave the public land laws as they are and . . . reestablish the original intent of these old, proven public land laws . . . and allow the private citizens the opportunity to acquire a more reasonable percentage in their rightful inheritance in their State and counties than they have now."⁷⁰ Two themes emerge: first, the wish to keep the traditional Pinchot-based definition of conservation in place, protecting and managing public land for its resource extractive qualities; and second, the desire to keep the bounty of that land closer to those extracting the wealth. The colonial relationship of the West with the rest of the country is admitted, but the frustration is with the wealth generated there going elsewhere.

Calvin Black taps into the old populist resentment that rocked the Plains and the West in the 1880s and 1890s, focused then on wealthy Midwestern railroads and corporations like the Anaconda Copper Mining Company that wrested the land's profitable bounty from the West and sent it elsewhere. Populist resentment

was now squarely focused on a federal government seen to be curbing traditional extraction activities on public lands with environmental impact statements, or by halting it altogether with land withdrawals, such as in the Wilderness Act, which was seen as an “all-purpose tool for stopping economic activity.”⁷¹ The environmental movement had “succeeded in politicizing the notion that commodity production represented the primary national purpose served by public lands,” and this is exactly what Westerners like Black feared.⁷² In response, Westerners wishing to protect the old way of doing business launched what became known as the Sagebrush Rebellion, a states’ rights, anti-federal government movement that still shapes politics in the American West.

The Sagebrush Rebellion first erupted in Nevada in 1979 but spread throughout much of the Rocky Mountain West—including Montana. The specific event triggering the rebellion was the passage by the Nevada Legislature of a bill to establish state control over “national public lands under the administration of the Bureau of Land Management.” But the heart of the rebellion concerned the national push concerning how to satisfy the nation’s increased energy needs. The East wanted more clean domestic energy sources—abundant in the West—while imposing a regulatory environment making extraction more difficult and less profitable. Worse, the arrogant East protested when Western states sought higher severance taxes for their efforts. In the mid-1970s, Montana passed a 30 percent severance tax on coal, the highest in the nation.⁷³

Generally speaking, the Sagebrush rebels believed that the federal government—and the rest of the nation for that matter—did not understand the West. These new, top-down regulations impeding progress were imposed by “heavy-handed bureaucrats” who undermined states’ rights and stifled Western self-determination.⁷⁴

Ronald Reagan’s election diffused the rebellion as his administration pursued resource-extraction-friendly policies and eased federal regulations concerning the use of public lands. But the perception of an assault on both the Western way of life and the traditional livelihoods of Westerners smolders just beneath the political surface, ready to be reignited by the right circumstances. The most recent spark was the ascendancy of Barack Obama to the presidency and the passage of a new series of federal laws, including a massive overhaul of healthcare that reawakened Western resentment in the form of the Tea Party. Like the Sagebrush Rebellion, the Tea Party responded with the doctrine of nullification, pushing for state laws to block a whole host of federal regulations after they won state legislative victories throughout the West.⁷⁵

In addition, new economic opportunities deepened Montana’s identity crisis. Distance from markets, the great barrier to economic diversification

bewitching Montana historically, is no longer an issue with blazing fast Internet connections that flatten the economic landscape. High-tech entrepreneurs can live anywhere now; why not move to Montana, especially when you can take advantage of the state's expanded airline connections to jump on a direct flight to Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Salt Lake City, Chicago, Denver, or New York to meet with clients? One of Bozeman's largest employers, RightNow Technologies, formed in Bozeman precisely for those reasons. The idea economy driven by what Richard Florida calls the "creative class," now can be a part of the Montana economic landscape.⁷⁶ And guess what? The creative class moves to Montana not to extract wealth from the land but to recreate and commune with it. This conflict of identity, centered on what it means to have a relationship with the land, will become more contentious as Montana's economy diversifies beyond resource extraction. Significantly, that conflict of identity no longer pits Montana against the federal government alone. Now it is a conflict between Montanans living together but sharing different visions for Montana's future.

MONTANA: THE PEOPLE

Demographically, Montana is overwhelmingly White; nearly 90 percent claim European ancestry.⁷⁷ Compared to other regions of the West, there is a substantial Catholic population—much of it the product of the mines in the western third of the state which drew heavily on immigrants from Catholic Europe for labor.⁷⁸ Although Latinos are the fastest-growing minority group nationally and constitute the largest minority group in many states, only three percent of Montanans claim Hispanic roots. The largest minority group, at more than six percent of the population, is Native American—many of whom are concentrated on reservations in the northern and eastern parts of the state. Relative to the rest of the nation, Montanans are older, poorer, and more likely to have served in the military. More than 16 percent of Montanans are 65 or older, making the state's population the fifth oldest in the country.⁷⁹ A very high percentage served in the military; as of the 2010 census, more than ten percent of Montanans are veterans. This high proportion of veterans may be explained by the relative lack of economic opportunities and relatively low wages paid to Montanans. With the median household income around \$40,000 in 2011, Montana is well below the national median.⁸⁰

Yet Montanans do not necessarily consider themselves poor. I asked a wide array of prominent Montanans if Montana was a poor state. Pat Williams said it was and largely blamed Montana's companies for refusing to pay good wages. "Our incomes are way too low. Particularly for the work that's done. It's hard

work out here. Our employers don't pay well. It's the truth of it."⁸¹ At the other extreme is Headwaters economist Ray Rasker, who flatly disagreed:

When we compare Montana, they'll have some statistic—per capita income or whatever—and we'll rank somewhere above Louisiana. OK, but we don't have a big metropolis. We don't have a Seattle, a Portland, a Denver. We don't have a big city. Our biggest city isn't a big city. It's small. It's like a medium-sized city in most states. So, what I did is (say), "Let's look at the economic statistics in Montana, and let's compare ourselves to our peers." So I looked at Colorado, but pulled Denver out of it. I looked at Utah, but pulled Salt Lake City out of it. And took Portland out of Oregon. We're actually doing better, on all measures, than our peers. . . . As a rural state, we're doing quite well."⁸²

Others argue that Montana's land and identity create a wealth beyond wages. Mike Halligan, the executive director of the Dennis and Phyllis Washington Foundation and former president of the Montana Senate, argued that "poor isn't measured by incomes in Montana. . . . because you can't . . . monetize the amenities from the fishing to the scenic values to just the ability to recreate."⁸³ Dan Kemmis, the former Missoula mayor, agreed. "If the only way you measure well-being is by average individual income, then yes, we're a relatively poor state. But we all know that's not all there is to well-being and in fact it's not all there is to prosperity and if we add in some things that make it really worth being here and that bring people here and keep people here—the physical surroundings, the strength of our communities, and so on—if you factor that into the sense of well-being, we're not a poor state. We're a very fortunate and, I would say, a prosperous state."⁸⁴

Montanans are prideful. "If Montana were a nation," said Williams, "it would be one of the most nationalistic nations on earth."⁸⁵ That pride begins with the land. Montanans know they live someplace special and do not take it for granted. In 1988, writers William Kittridge and Annick Smith published an anthology featuring some of Montana's best literary talent entitled *The Last Best Place*.⁸⁶ The title became synonymous with the state itself; in fact, Montana's congressional delegation led by former Senator Max Baucus protected the phrase for the state and its people with a trademark.⁸⁷

Recall that Montanans view themselves somewhat wistfully as rugged individualists in part because they survive such an unyielding place. They believe it makes them distinctive. I asked Congressman Rehberg how to describe Montana to a New Yorker during our first trip together. He went straight to "rugged individualist."⁸⁸ He came back to it when talking about Montana values, saying that

Montanans believe in a “value system where the individual still matters.”⁸⁹ Rehberg’s answer stressed toughness and the value of each person’s own contribution. Former Republican Secretary of State Bob Brown, who served for decades in the state legislature and taught high school social studies, also mentioned individualism. But his emphasis was different: “Montana was kind of one of the last places to be settled of the adjacent forty-eight states at least. So, my thinking is, perhaps Montanans have in our genes at least a kind of a wanderlust. . . . maybe a little more of . . . an individualistic [attitude], maybe people that just don’t want to conform and settle down.”⁹⁰ The freedom to be left alone, to be nonconformist, seemed to be a right Montanans particularly prized. Perhaps this leave me alone attitude was the perceived benefit of surviving where few else dared to even try; my ruggedness tamed this place, but I won’t be tamed in return.

But that is still an incomplete portrayal. Montanans are not a bunch of misanthropes despite the belief among some that the state is populated by a bunch of Ted Kaczynskis.⁹¹ When I asked Wyckoff what Montana meant to him, he went straight to community: “The . . . distinctive thing about Montana is the sense of community and the sense of traditional values and that kind of connection to tradition in towns. . . . You kind of get a sense of how important that identity with place is.”⁹² What are those traditional values? One is a sense of togetherness which belies the simplistic notion of Montanans as rugged loners. I asked Mike Halligan about the apparent contradiction. “I just think that the internal ethic that drives the rugged individualism also is one that is broad enough to kind of pull in the ethic that we are part of a community that we all have the responsibility to protect this place” he explained. Montana is “a working ranch, and in a working ranch, everybody—the owner, the family, the ranch hands, everybody—works together to make it all happen.”⁹³ It is clear that Montanans believe strongly in a communal responsibility to each other in this cold and often harsh landscape. “If you get in a tough spot,” says Wyckoff, Montanans will “help you out.”⁹⁴ Part of the rugged individual mystique is also a reliance on neighbors to lend a helping hand because Montana is one big family in “a town with long streets.”⁹⁵

The threats to this community and place are many: fiscal profligacy, immigration of folks with different values who build gated communities and drive up land prices, and the graying of the generation that knew Montana before Starbucks, the Internet, and the interstate. But perhaps the two most dangerous threats to the values Montanans claim to share also have had the greatest impact on Montana’s historic development: the federal government and corporations. Both are a source of fear because they are viewed as distant and “other,” meaning they are incapable of understanding Montana’s unique historical place or its people’s connection to the land and their traditional values based upon

rugged individualism. Resentment of the federal government is spread throughout Montana despite—or perhaps because of—the federal government’s looming presence in Montana financially.

The federal government plays an outsized role in the Montana economy; Montana wins the federal spending game. According to a recently published analysis, Montana received \$1.50 in federal dollars for every dollar sent in taxes to Washington, DC in 2008.⁹⁶ *The Economist* looked at federal transfers over a longer period, from 1990 through 2009. Federal spending accounted for 184 percent of Montana’s gross domestic product during the 20-year period examined. In other words, federal spending in Montana for the period was almost twice the economic output of the state’s domestic industry. Only four states performed better at the federal trough. Montana’s economy is, in essence, sustained by outsiders and non-Montanans—especially taxpayers in the blue states of Delaware, Minnesota, New Jersey, Illinois, and Connecticut.⁹⁷ This directly contradicts Montana’s image as rugged individualists and breeds resentment.

The resentment goes beyond shame in appearing dependent. It is an anger rooted, perhaps, in the federal government’s complicity in selling Montanans, particularly those in the East, on a false dream founded on dubious premises. It was the federal government that opened the West with the promise of free land. And while the drought and the financial collapse may not have been the fault of the feds, those who remained pride themselves on their own wits, ingenuity, and spirit in surviving the catastrophe of the 1920s and 1930s. The federal government did help, and many of those struck by the disaster of the drought and the Great Depression appealed for that help and were glad to have it.⁹⁸ But others were too ashamed or stubborn to ask for it, and over time, the federal government that continues to help Montana with large sums of transfer payments, agricultural subsidies, and federal highway dollars became to be seen by some as much a cause of suffering as the solution to it. Certainly, the distrust of the federal government has only grown post-Sagebrush Rebellion as every government program and initiative is seen as a potential threat to the resource-based livelihoods of Montanans—livelihoods, one might add, that were once subsidized and encouraged by the same federal government that seemed to change the rules midstream.

The other fear—the other “other”—are large corporations. While the federal government established the structures and policies encouraging western settlement, it was corporations that often bent the rules to their advantage. Federal policy made land available to Westerners, but as Bob Swartout reminded me, James J. Hill’s railroad was “the real villain” that advertised the wonders of dry land agriculture in eastern cities and throughout Europe.⁹⁹ It was the Anaconda Copper Mining Company with the help of Montana Power—both in this case

Western-grown corporations—that pulled the strings of Montana’s legislature for decades. Asbestos mining in Libby by W. R. Grace and the cyanide leaching from the Zortman-Landusky gold mine have left behind a sad environmental legacy. And then there are the riches that have migrated elsewhere. The effects of Montana’s legacy as a one-company state echo in the Constitution and its political practice laws which, until recently, prohibited corporate and labor union money in campaigns and placed tight restrictions on the contributions candidates for office could accept. Montanans are wary of the federal government and corporations from afar because they see them as false prophets carrying tidings which, invariably, break down community, hurt the land, and ultimately serve to make Montana like every other subdivision and street corner in America. They threaten Montana’s distinctiveness, and Montanans are justifiably leery.

CONCLUSION

Montana is the Last Best Place, but by being last Montana is, by definition, endangered from without. Montanans have an array of choices to make as they move forward into the 21st century, but those choices depend first on how they understand their past. They can choose to move boldly forward, confident in a promising future by drawing energy from a shared past. Or they can move timidly, fearing that same past and—instead of learning from it—become enslaved by it. Pat Williams summed it up succinctly: “Montana can be that lyrical place where a river runs through it and a kind and generous people populate it. Or it can be the place of the Freeman where anger and isolation set our tomorrows.”¹⁰⁰ Montanans must be ever vigilant against the threats facing their state and communities, but that vigilance can either be tempered by optimism or by fear.

It would be up to the electorate to begin answering that question more clearly. Montana’s Senate race in 2012, at its core, was about two men shaped by the contradictions swirling about the meaning of Montana and the American West. Each is rooted in different experiences in the land and philosophies about the federal government. How Montanans would decide the shape and tenor of their tomorrows boiled down to the choice between two native sons deeply of the land: Denny Rehberg and Jon Tester. Both represented Montana together in Congress and had similar representational styles. Their “presentations of self” focused on their connection to place and demonstrating how they were “one of us.” Each had the appropriate credentials allowing them to speak for the land. But they embodied different traditions in that increasingly contested place. As important and distinctive as their ensuing campaign would be for a greater understanding of representation, the role of campaigns in explaining election

outcomes, and the consequences of *Citizens United*, it also signified for Montana the end of the most recent and long chapter in Montana's effort to bring her tomorrows into greater focus.

Fenno is right: Members of Congress do not think of their geographic constituency as an undifferentiated mass. As we will see, Tester and Rehberg pay close attention to different constituencies within Montana. But sometimes a place dictates a particular representational style, a presentation of self, reflecting that place. Both Rehberg and Tester tried to capture Montana and the ability to speak for it by evoking their relationship to the land through their generational lineage, their styles of dress, and their work as agriculturalists. Without this connection, without hinting at how each understood the shared story of Montana, constituents would have trouble giving their trust. In many ways, the campaign that unfolded was as much about who could claim the mantle of "one of us" as it was about policy and partisanship.

NOTES

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28. Bob Swartout, interview with author, May 30, 2012.
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