When twenty-five-year-old Gwendolen Haste came to Billings, Montana, with her family in the spring of 1915, she discovered a land unlike any she had ever known. The Hastes arrived just as “early spring was offering one mild bright day after another before the cold bleakness of the rains of a Montana May and early June. The Yellowstone Valley stretched its irrigated fields, checkered with the fresh green of winter wheat, and the rimrock cut its sharp yellow edge to the north. . . . The Beartooths blocked the valley’s western end with distant blue and white; and toward the east the rimrock leaped the river, forming a Chinese wall that ran into the distance,” Gwendolen noted in her memoir. “No country that our lifetime wanderings had taken us to was like this.”

*The absence of big stores and familiar faces, to say nothing of the amusements and pleasures afforded Ottumwans and other inhabitants of Iowa cities, are not to be missed by the three plucky Ottumwa girls, Misses Ina Dana, Grace Blinks, and Margaret Majors, who are now residents of the wilds of Montana,* reads a newspaper clipping in the photograph album of Grace Blinks Price, pictured above with her homestead shack. In 1911, these three young women came to Sumatra, about eighty miles, as the crow flies, northeast of Billings. Four years later Gwendolen Haste would arrive in Billings and, after meeting homesteaders like the three Iowa women, write poetry that captured the essence of their lives.
The Hastes had come from Lincoln, Nebraska, where Gwendon’s father, Richard A. Haste, had edited the dryland farming magazine *Campbell’s Scientific Farmer* until it was sold to civic leader and entrepreneur Preston B. Moss of Billings in 1914. The magazine’s new owner was not a farmer himself, but he was a shrewd businessman who thought a planned community, a “garden city” between Billings and Laurel called Mossmain, would attract investors if they understood the agricultural promise of the Yellowstone Valley; his city would be an irrigated wonderland (complete with a city park with a lake, a swimming pool, and a sunken garden). Moss had already been selling stock in the venture, and he hoped that articles and ads in *Campbell’s Scientific Farmer* would make it possible to build this ambitious dream. Richard Haste was to continue serving as the magazine’s editor in Billings. Gwendon—Gwenna to her friends—would serve as her father’s editorial assistant and as the magazine’s circulation director.

Gwenna had already lived in a number of places in her life, the family moving frequently throughout her childhood at the whim of her father, whom she often referred to as “Richard the Rover” or “that wanderer.” Richard Haste began his working life as an attorney in Wichita, Kansas, where he established a comfortable practice. After the Wichita boom went bust, Haste tried to practice in Wisconsin, but left the legal profession to pursue the less comfortable but apparently more appealing life of a journalist. He worked for a St. Paul, Minnesota, newspaper, was a publicist for the Canadian Pacific Railroad, and wrote a series of railroad stories for *Pearson’s Magazine*, among other ventures. In Illinois, Haste edited a “Sunday Magazine” for small town papers, staying in that state long enough for Gwenna to graduate from the University of Chicago. Always far more practical than her husband, Mrs. Haste, Sarah Jane Atherton before her marriage, often augmented the family income by teaching, taking in boarders, and giving bridge lessons. To the Hastes, Montana seemed full of opportunity.

The Hastes’ optimism about Montana was widely shared in 1915. Homesteaders had been flooding onto Montana’s sparsely populated plains in large numbers since the 1909 passage of the Enlarged Homestead Act, which doubled to 320 acres the amount of land
that could be claimed. To “prove up,” homesteaders were required to have one-eighth of the acreage under cultivation at all times, but they needed to spend only three years on the property and could be away from the land for five months during each of those years. During the next decade, Montana saw the population of most of its counties more than double as homesteaders moved in make their fortunes, fortunes all but guaranteed by the advertisements of the Great Northern and Northern Pacific railroads, both of which touted the richness of the Montana soil and the suitability of its climate for agrarian pursuits.⁶

For a short while after the Hastes arrived in Billings, the dryland farming gamble seemed to be paying off; nature cooperated by sending rain and sunshine as needed and holding off on the hail, grasshoppers, and

Grace Binks managed to comfortably furnish her tiny shack, creating what she called her “Parlor Corner” and “Kitchen Corner,” shown above and left. In contrast, Haste’s homestead wife in the poem “Dried Out” mournfully mused, “Oh God, the nice white ranch house with a floor / We was to have!”
The three Ottumwa girls homesteading near Sumatra kept loneliness at bay by building their three shacks on adjoining corners of their homesteads, sixty feet apart, and sharing in their chores. Grace and Margaret posed here with axe and hammer.

blight. "Those were the good years—the wet years—when every man who had taken the Great Northern bait was hopeful that hard work would get him his heart's desire, while the old-timers held their breath," Gwenna reflected. But dryland farming was in for rough times ahead, what she would later describe as "falling banks, heartsick farmers, limping businesses, and all the melancholy results of drought and disaster. Come 1917 the drouth began, reaching its climax in 1919, and precipitating a dreary depression when shacks were deserted, implements were retrieved by the dealers or rusted in the fields, and small-town bankers shot themselves." It was a period, she wrote, when Montanans, whether they lived in the cities or in rural areas, heard "the wind . . . of failure keening in their ears."

Settled into their new home in the 300 block of North Thirty-Second Street, the Hastes, father and daughter, enjoyed walking every morning to the office of Campbell's Scientific Farmer located on the second floor of the Masonic Temple. They found
Billings an inviting community. Since established in the 1880s, it had “sprouted a few blocks of substantial business houses” and the town itself was “compact and cheerful.” Still, in 1915 Billings remained rural enough that Gwenna could look out her office window and observe a rooster-shaped weathervane on the barn across the road.7

While Richard wrote much of the editorial content for the publication and oversaw the work of his business manager, a Mr. Burns, Gwenna kept the circulation records and helped out where needed. Cora Fleming, who had also worked with Richard on Campbell’s Scientific Farmer in Lincoln, handled correspondence and was the proof reader.8 Outside the office, the Hastes often made trips to surrounding areas to meet with homesteading families.

Visiting those whose lives were quite different from her own gave Gwenna a wide view of her adopted state. “The two worlds of Montana I knew always fascinated me with their dramatic differences,” she wrote in the 1960s. “Billings was an attractive little city in those days with many paved streets, shaded by maples, poplars, and other pleasant leafage. . . . The city water system kept lawns green and gardens bright. The streets were well-lighted and cheerful.” But, she noted, “once away from the valley, busy and fertile in the brilliant sunlight, life was another picture and another story.” Small towns were “brutal clusters of shacks, huddled around a railroad station or set down along a road running from one bleak hillside to another. Water was drawn from misery wells, so there were no trees, no lawns, no gardens.” “And,” she continued, “the homes where those courageous ranchers lived! There was an occasional frame shack, but tarpaper was prevalent, and the soddy was still with us. Out-buildings were casual or non-existent. The men and women, dressed for the hardest kind of living, were shabby, with skins burned and hair bleached by the constant light.”9

In addition to isolation and hard work, homesteading had other hazards, as Carrie Berg found circa 1926 on her homestead near Lindsay, about twenty-five miles northwest of Glendive. In this picture, she is holding snakes of thirty-nine and fifty-nine inches that were killed in her cellar.
In “The Prayer of the Homesteader,” Haste captured the agony felt by many homesteaders after years of devastating drought. One of her Billings friends once told Gwenna, “I don’t know how you can write those poems when you didn’t go through hell with the rest of us.” Gwenna’s response mentioned her “nights of sleeplessness and misery” and that “My own particular hell had something to do with the inspiration.” She later commented, “Many of the poems that got written during the next couple of years [after her return to Billings in 1920] stemmed from my own physical difficulties and the appalling disaster that was striking down those around me.”

Prayer of the Homesteader

Dear Lord, we are afraid.
We do not know this land.
These mountains are too cold and tall and bare;
Within their flanks the gray wolf has his lair.
Safety lay thick upon the fields
And friendly hill tops of our youth.
Lord, you will understand
We are not cowards
But we do not like this land.
We were taught simple things when we were young.
We know the path a plow makes in black loam,
The way of pleasant showers on April days,
The soft winds of our home.
We know the healing rains of summer nights,
And the gold plenty of the harvesting.
But this land fights.
Its hard brown sod protests against the plow,
Its stubborn grasses cling.
Our young crops are beat flat by roaring hail,
And when the rains should visit us in spring
There comes a hot strange gale,
Like desert wind blown over glittering sand,
That dries the little wheat.
Lord, did you mean that men should farm this land?

Lord, this is not a land where men should live.
Our minds rake up a harvest of old tales
Whispered around old fires,
And butte and coulee ring with chattering wails.
Upon these iron benches Things have stalked.
When morning breaks we are afraid to look
For fear great feet have walked
And left crushed tracks upon the buffalo grass.
These creeping nights of ghosts were never made
For man and sleep.
Dear Lord, we are afraid.
Lord, can it be that this is not your land?
Your ways are peaceful ways through country lanes,
But you have never walked upon these plains,
We never see your face beneath these skies.
Come to us, Lord;
Man should not live alone within the world,
He is not strong or wise.
Bless our thin crops.
Teach the small trees to grow.
Stretch us your kindly hand.
We must have comfort in this alien land.

Still, homesteading seemed to Gwenna “a tremendous life.” “A shack perched near a scant water supply could have a scope across the world that took in majestic blue and white spurs of the Rockies. Where a primitive road twisted around a shoulder covered with scanty wheat or still gray with sagebrush, there would loom the mass of the Beartooths, the Judith mountains, the Snowies, or the Big Horns.” And before 1918, the people were “lively, healthy,” and “full of hope.”

While Richard talked about crops and new farming techniques with the men, Gwenna heard tales from those who most often bore the brunt of the isolation and hard work of homesteading—the women. When Gwenna began to write poems, portraits of the homesteaders’ hard-scrabble existence flowed easily from her pen. One such woman’s voice summed up the situation so many faced:

Dried Out
This place was the first home we ever had,  
And I was sick of farming for other folks  
First in Wisconsin and then in Dakota.  
It looked so pretty when he broke sod that day.  
There wa’n’t only three sides to the house,  
But what did I care!  
There was sunlight and wet rain and a coulee  
full of springtime where the children could play.  
Seven full years, says the Book, and seven lean—  
And we come in at the end of the full ones,  
I guess.  
There ain’t no crops where they’s no rain.

And the stock died in the big blizzard.  
So now we’re goin’  
Back to Dakota to farm for other folks.  
Oh God, the nice white ranch house with a  
floor  
We was to have! The roses by the door!

Not all was bleak, however, especially in those first “full years” that the Hastes were in Montana, and Gwenna wrote about advantages of homestead life too.

Horizons
I had to laugh,  
For when she said it we were sitting by the door,  
And straight down was the Fork,  
Twisting and turning and gleaming in the sun.  
And then your eyes carried across to the purple  
bench beyond the river  
With the Beartooth Mountains fairly screaming  
with light and blue and snow,  
And fold and turn of rimrock and prairie as far as  
your eye could go.  
And she says: “Dear Laura, sometimes I feel so  
sorry for you,  
Shut away from everything—  
eating out your heart with loneliness.  
When I think of my own full life, I wish that you  
could share it.  
Just pray for happier days to come and bear it.”  
She goes back to Billings to her white stucco  
house,
In the course of visiting homesteading families, Gwenna had ample opportunity to observe the differing ways the wives of the homesteaders coped or failed to cope with their new living conditions, daily routines, and frequent hardships. While the women she wrote about were imaginary in the sense that she never identified the inspirations for her poems, they were all real in the sense that, with few exceptions, the lives these women found on eastern Montana homesteads lacked many of the amenities and familiar comforts of the homes and communities they had left behind.

**The Stoic**

She guessed there wasn’t any time for tears
Because her heart had held them all unshe’d
While one by one her little hopes had fled
Down through those racking, windy, drouth filled years;
The frozen winter when the cattle died,
The year the hail bent flat the tender wheat,
The thirsty summers with their blazing heat—
She met them all with wordless, rigid pride.
But when sometimes the children in the spring
Searching through barren hill or ragged butte
Would heap her lap with loco bloom and bring
Clouds of blue larkspur and bright bitter-root,
Then would she run away to hide her pain
For memory of old gardens drenched with rain.

From “Montana Wins Nation’s Poetry Prize,” Campbell’s Scientific Farmer 15 (March 1922), 77.

And looks through net curtains at another white stucco house,
And a brick house,
And a yellow frame house,
And six trimmed poplar trees,
And little squares of shaved grass.
Oh dear, she stared at me like I was daft!
I couldn’t help it. I just laughed and laughed.¹²

Still, there were the women who found their new way of life not only physically hard but emotionally crippling. Haste’s best-known poem “The Ranch in the Coulee” presents such a woman:

**The Ranch in the Coulee**

He built the ranch house down a little draw,
So that he should have wood and water near.
The bluffs rose all around. She never saw
The arching sky, the mountains lifting clear;
But to the west the close hills fell away
And she could glimpse a few feet of the road.
The stage to Roundup went by every day,
Sometimes a rancher town-bound with his load,
An auto swirling dusty through the heat,
In many ways, Haste seems an unlikely chronicler of homesteading life. Gregarious by nature, she enjoyed an active social life among the Billings elite; her friends included sons and daughters of P. B. Moss and others from the same circle. Though still a small town, Billings offered entertainments such as the 1920 parade on Montana Avenue pictured here.

Haste also would have found a drawback in the attire required for the homesteading life. The "clothes horse" habits described in her letters would not have served her well for the required chores. Above, the Ottumwa girls pose in "Hauling the Winters Wood."
Or children trudging home on tired feet.
At first she watched it as she did her work.
A horseman pounding by gave her a thrill.
But then within her brain began to lurk
The fear that if she lingered from the sill
Someone might pass unseen. So she began
To keep the highroad always within sight,
And when she found it empty long she ran
And beat upon the pane and cried with fright.
The winter was the worst. When snow
would fall
He found it hard to quiet her at all.13

When Gwenna showed “The Ranch in the Coulee” to acquaintances in Billings, she found her portrayal of the homesteading wife verified by people who had reason to know. “There are three types on those ranches—the educated woman who has her piano or victrola and her books, the peasant who has never known anything but slavery to the soil, and the woman in between. She’s the one who can’t take it,” a female attorney told her. In her memoir, Gwenna wrote, “My doctor looked up from reading ‘The Ranch in the Coulee’ and said: ‘What’s the next verse?’ I replied: ‘Don’t you know the next verse, Doctor Clarke?’ ‘I certainly do,’ he said. ‘They come in here every day and there is nothing we can do. Hard work, excessive child bearing, loneliness. It gets them and we can’t help them.’”14

Gwenna entered “The Ranch in the Coulee” in The Nation magazine’s poetry contest in 1922, and the poem not only shared the first-place award but was later reprinted in the Literary Digest, which Haste referred to as “the Reader’s Digest” of its day. As a result, Gwenna began to hear from people—mostly women—across the country, who were horrified at the thought of this poor woman going mad on a Montana homestead. Their intentions were certainly kind; most echoed the offer of one easterner who requested the address of the ranch in the coulee: “I’d love to write to someone as lonely as that,” she told Haste, who could not provide her with a name or address because the woman she had written about was a composite of many lonely souls.15

Another woman wrote to tell Haste that she’d gotten the last line of the poem wrong. “He never would have noticed,” she said—somewhat bitterly. Haste agreed to an extent: “I tend to think that all men, whether in a board room in New York City or on a homestead—pay more attention to business than to their wives. I guess saving the cattle is more important than a woman weeping over the dishpan.”16

*While Gwenna saw both the joys and the sorrows of homesteading, it certainly was not a life she would ever have chosen for herself. For one thing, she was too social to have lasted very long on a ranch miles away from the nearest neighbor—and she probably wouldn’t have had much in common with those neighbors if they did visit back and forth. While in Billings, Gwenna took as her friends the children of P. B. Moss and other young people from that same circle. She also knew many of the state’s leading political figures, including Jeannette Rankin and Burton K. Wheeler, for whom her father later worked in Washington D.C. after Wheeler’s election to the U.S. Senate in 1922.17

For another, Gwenna always seemed to have a number of male admirers, none of whom were farmers or ranchers. Instead, they were bankers, businessmen, or attorneys, or—later in her life—men associated with the publishing field. The letters she saved from an assortment
of these gentlemen fairly sizzle with sexual references, which suggests that she appreciated the new freedoms associated with the "roaring Twenties." Although many of her early suitors pressed her to marry them, she declined all such offers. 18

Another drawback to homesteading for Haste would have been the attire required for life lived on the land. Haste herself was a "clothes horse." Her letters to her mother and her female friends are filled with references to this dress, that hat, this costume or that, most described in vivid (and full) detail, such as her "black pajamas and blue coolie coat [worn] with those blue enamel and white jade earrings which set off the coat something grand." This particular outfit "makes an awfully nice tea gown and isn't always in the way for chasing around," she reported to her parents. That "tea gown" wouldn't have lasted a day in a sod hut or a tarpaper shack. 19

When the elder Hastes left Billings for Washington in 1923, their daughter also moved to the East Coast, settling in New York City. She still had occasional "bad turns" from an illness she contracted in Wisconsin where she'd gone to work in a munitions factory near the end of World War I (she had left Montana in 1918 and returned in 1920). 20 Still, Gwenna managed some part-time work for the Equitable Life Assurance Society—where she had worked briefly after leaving the munitions factory—before landing a position with The Survey magazine. In 1926, she joined the Consumer Affairs staff of General Foods, where she stayed until her retirement in 1954.

Gwenna did not marry until 1936, when she was forty-seven. According to a friend, she had been living with Marlin Hennessey, a New York City businessman, for some time when she received word that her mother was planning to visit her. As a result, the two married, presumably to spare Mrs. Haste the shock of finding her only child living in sin. The marriage—which by all accounts was a happy one—ended tragically two years later when Marlin was killed in a streetcar-pedestrian accident on December 6, 1938. After she was widowed, however, Haste did not lack for male companionship. In fact, within a few months of her husband's death, she wrote to one of her earlier admirers, a publisher from the Philadelphia area whom she had broken off with some years before, and their later correspondence suggests that he became "the gentleman from Pennsylvania" whom Martha Kelly, her friend and General Foods co-worker, recalled seeing frequently at Gwenna's when invited over for cocktails—which, Kelly remembered, were served every night at Gwenna's apartment. 21

Although she lived in New York City for the rest of her life, Gwenna stayed in touch with old friends and literary acquaintances in Montana by mail (H. G. Merriam enjoyed featuring her poems in The Frontier magazine). She also made occasional trips to her one-time home state and lifetime inspiration for much of her poetry, including a visit to Grace Stone Coates in Martinsdale in 1941 and to P. B. Moss's daughter Melville at her Billings home, now known as the Moss Mansion, in 1954.

Gwendolen Haste lived into her nineties and continued to write poetry all of her life, "snagging," as she would have said, "the occasional acceptance for publication." None of what she produced in her later years came close to the power of the Montana poems, however. She spent a very few years of a very long life in this state, but those few years provided her with experiences that prompted the finest verse she ever produced and helped create a poetic historical record of an important period in the development of Montana. 22

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Gwendolen Haste 
2. A leading proponents of dryland farming and the organizer of the Dry Farming Congress in 1907, Hardy Webster Campbell founded Campbell’s Scientific Farmer in 1908. The magazine achieved a circulation of 30,000 before moving to Billings in 1914. By 1922, however, editor Richard Haste vehemently wrote that the magazine had no association with Campbell or his ideas. “Believing that the advice which Mr. Campbell is giving to the farmers of this state, if followed, will result in great harm,” Haste wrote, “we wish to state that the Scientific Farmer is in no way responsible for and does not endorse this campaign [Campbell had been hired by the Montana Development Association to conduct a summer follow campaign in the state], nor the vagaries put forth by Mr. Campbell under the name of scientific soil tillage.” The farmers of Montana,” Haste continued, “are not in position to experiment and I would advise them to take any specific advice with a large pinch of caution.” The Campbell name was not taken off the magazine’s nameplate until January 1923. Gary D. Libecap, “Learning about the Weather: Dryfarming and Homestead Failure in Eastern Montana, 1900-1925,” Montana The Magazine of Western History, 52 (Spring 2002), 26; Mary M. Hargreaves, “Hardy Webster Campbell (1850-1937),” Agricultural History, 32 (January 1958), 64; R. A. Haste, “Does Not Represent the Campbell System,” Campbell’s Scientific Farmer, 15 (March 1922), 77.
3. According to Moss’s vision, once Mossman was up and running, it would be joined by “villages” called Fontana and Gardenvale. Beyond building a small post office on the property, however, the Mossman project never took off and a good many people lost what they had invested.
4. Haste, “Pattern of Time,” 49. As the Hastes’ only child, Gwenna remained very close to her parents until their deaths, and it was not until the family left Billings that she completely “struck out on her own.” She also had experienced some periods of illness throughout her early years, which may have accounted for her remaining a member of the parental household for as long as she did. Or she may just have enjoyed the whirlwind of activity in a family always on the move.
5. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, Montana’s population boomed from 376,053 in 1910 to 548,889 in 1920.
7. Ibid., 52.
8. When P. B. Moss had a post office built at the Mossman site, poor Cora was directed to live in the building. She told Gwenna that it scared her to death to be all alone out there at night, but it would have meant losing her job had she refused.
10. Ibid., 76.
12. Ibid., 55.
13. Ibid., 56.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 79.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. In reference to her illness, in “Pattern of Time” Gwenna mentions needing a great deal of rest and of suffering from "nerves," but the exact nature of her illness is not clear.
22. Haste, “Pattern of Time,” 57. She continued to be a rather private person until the end of her life. When Orvis Burcher, the co-editor of Ahashta Press at Boise State University in Idaho, contacted her about printing a collection of her work (The Selected Poems of Gwendolen Haste, 1976), she was delighted—but despite Burcher being “almost rudely persistent” in asking for access to her papers (his words in an August 20, 1989, letter to me), she never did “rise to [his] pleas.”

When Does a Cactus Become an Angry Buffalo?
The different recorders of the Lakota games used variants in terms and spellings. This article uses the terms and spellings as recorded by Father Buechel, who himself used variants.