



*Dryland farm, McCone County, March 1942, by John Vachon*

# HUNGER

## **A Memoir of Growing Up in Northeastern Montana**

*by Ruth McLaughlin, introduced by Dee Garceau*

**Consider** a 1942 photograph by John Vachon of a dryland farm on the High Line in northeastern Montana. In the foreground, a mailbox marks rutted tire tracks as the family driveway. These tracks curve slowly toward the far horizon, finally disappearing over a swell. In the middle distance, a clapboard farmhouse stands, flanked by smaller, weathered outbuildings, two horses, a truck, and a car. The house and outbuildings appear puny, isolated in the sun's glare, the expanse of wind, the seas of grass.<sup>1</sup> Captured in

a Farm Security Administration portfolio, this homestead resembles the one at the center of the memoir "Hunger" by Ruth McLaughlin, which appears in the following pages.

Another photograph from the same period makes a startling contrast to the first. Neither home nor outbuildings break the monotony of field and sky. Acres of wheat extend to the horizon in orderly rows of stubble and fallow ground. It is a vast, manicured landscape, carved with mechanical precision. Two



***Harvesting Wheat, Froid, August 1941, by Marion Post Woolcott***

combines ply the fields, identified in the caption as a Schnitzler Corporation farm. Taken by Farm Security Administration photographer Marion Post Woolcott, this photo signals a change that gathered force across the northern plains during Ruth McLaughlin’s lifetime; federal investment in agriculture during the Great Depression followed by surges in farm production during World War II intensified a shift toward large-scale mechanized farming. By 1947, when Ruth McLaughlin was born, family homesteads on the High Line struggled to keep pace with their corporate competitors. Her generation would be unsentimental about their pioneer forebears; they would scrutinize a landscape of dwindling prospects and seek their fortunes elsewhere.

McLaughlin writes with a child’s powers of observation, acute and unadorned. Exploring her memories of the family farm near Culbertson, Montana, she is at once loving and critical. Her memoir offers a counter to the narrative convention of triumph over adversity, unearthing difficult truths beneath the pioneer lore.

How McLaughlin comes to terms with the failures of the family farm forms the heart of her story.

Much has been written by and about the first generation of non-Indian emigrants, those who answered the siren call of cheap public land during the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> These narratives valorize the homesteader, often at the expense of their native North American predecessors. But less is known about the descendants of homesteaders, those who inherited the charge to make something of the land.<sup>3</sup> “Hunger” opens the world of those left to solve conundrums of meaning and survival on the semi-arid plains during the mid-twentieth century.

Homesteading in the early twentieth century offered “many avenues of opportunity for the yeoman,” wrote Wallace Stegner, “and yet every one tempted him into an enterprise with a sixty-six percent chance of failure.” Stegner referred to lands west of the hundredth meridian, where a semi-arid climate and extremes of heat and cold made small family farms barely viable. But few understood these

limitations during the early 1900s. Dryland techniques promised to make farming without irrigation possible. In response to liberal land laws passed in 1909 and 1912, newcomers flocked to Montana, taking up 320-acre claims under the Enlarged Homestead Act or 640-acre claims under the Desert Land Act, and sometimes filing adjacent claims in extended family groups. Aided by railroad companies eager to establish new markets, some two hundred thousand new homesteads were founded in the state by 1921.<sup>4</sup>

At first, crop yields met expectations. Between 1909 and 1917, rainfall on the Montana plains averaged above normal. By all accounts, it looked as though a small family farm could prosper in the nation's new "wheat belt." Then drought set in from 1918 to 1921, and dry-farming strategies failed. Too late, homesteaders realized that rain did not "follow the plow" nor did dust mulches protect seedlings and roots when there was too little moisture to begin with. Falling farm prices and extreme temperatures brought economic depression to the northern plains well before the crash of 1929. According to economist Gary Libecap, while these problems plagued farmers throughout the upper Great Plains, "eastern Montana homesteaders were most affected. The region had the nation's highest rates of loan foreclosure, farm abandonment, and bank failure due to unpaid loans." Ultimately sixty thousand Montana homesteaders called it quits.<sup>5</sup>

To complicate matters, dry-farming boosters spoke in the idioms of Jeffersonian self-reliance. Any intelligent farmer, they said, who practiced responsible moisture conservation could master the elements and produce a crop.<sup>6</sup> If a dry-farmer failed, it was understood as a failure of will, of expertise, or of skill. The belief that a farmer could and should make it on the High Line drove Ruth McLaughlin's grandfather to persist at the expense of his family, whom he mustered into unrelieved, unremitting work on the family's homestead. Here, McLaughlin's memoir veers sharply from the master narrative of optimistic pioneer families who pull together to make a success. She observes, dry-eyed, that her grandfather established the farm at great cost to his family, creating a legacy of emotional impoverishment that passed to ensuing generations.

Like others who hung on, McLaughlin's grandparents diversified, growing cash crops of wheat and

livestock and coaxing a kitchen garden to feed the family. Still, the odds were against them. Compared to the Midwest, where rainfall averaged 25 inches per year, rainfall averaged only 13 inches per year on the Montana plains.<sup>7</sup> As small farms went belly up, larger competitors acquired their land, and consolidation of more acreage in the hands of fewer owners began. Between 1910 and 1925, the average size of those farms that survived drought increased by 28 percent.<sup>8</sup> Prolonged drought during the 1930s made semi-arid conditions even worse. In a study of 503 insolvent farms on the Montana plains from 1928 to 1935, a Montana State University graduate student concluded that the most productive farms had to be "twice the size of the average farm" in order to afford summer fallowing to replenish moisture and nutrients in the soil.<sup>9</sup> Such was the economic landscape against which McLaughlin's grandfather struggled.

New Deal programs furthered the trend toward consolidation of wealth and large-scale production on Montana farms. As Mary Murphy observed in her analysis of Farm Security Administration photographs, the Great Depression marked a turning point in westerners' attitudes toward the federal government. Out of necessity, they became willing to accept help, imperfect as it was, filtered through patronage. The New Deal brought federal monies to the High Line in the form of farm subsidies, loans, irrigation projects, Extension Services, resettlement programs, work relief, and direct relief. In 1935 alone, 20 to 30 percent of residents in Montana's northeastern counties relied on relief. From 1933 to 1939, residents of the northern plains received more federal aid than most other regions in the country. By the end of the 1930s, three-quarters of Montana farms grew wheat, and most of that on unirrigated land. New Deal Extension Services had preached modified dryfarming, combining the best of hard-won wisdom about making it through drought. Contour plowing to prevent erosion, summer fallow to preserve moisture, and diversification were the order of the day. To make ends meet, these strategies required ever more acreage, strengthening the trend toward large-scale agriculture.<sup>10</sup>

When World War II brought rising wheat prices, it was enough to keep small family homesteads in the game. Federal contracts nourished agriculture in Montana but favored vast, capital-intensive opera-

tions based on “machines and chemicals” since they produced greater volume for troops overseas. Ironically, mechanization reduced the need for farm labor even as wheat production boomed. And so able-bodied workers left for the cities to take jobs in defense industry. By 1944, Montana’s rural population had dwindled to pre-1920 levels. Over the next decade, rural towns on the High Line lost 20 percent of their residents. Among those who stayed were McLaughlin’s parents. In 1943, they married and took up land vacated by the first exodus of homesteaders. There they began a lifetime of struggle to make ends meet. Unlike their larger competitors, McLaughlin’s parents did not have the luxury of leaving much land in fallow. Their farm required nearly continuous production to make a living. During drought years, that remained dicey at best.<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere, American industry emerged from World War II strengthened by federal investment and infrastructure, setting the stage for a burgeoning postwar consumer culture. The advertising industry popularized higher material standards for a growing middle class. Agribusiness reflected these developments, mass-producing food products for rapidly expanding supermarket chains. Small family farms confronted markets increasingly dominated by Green Giant vegetables, Nabisco cereals, Wonder bread, Campbell’s soups, and Del Monte fruits. Townsfolk reveled in store-bought clothes, Coca-Colas, and

automobiles with radios. On the northern plains, despite a few wet years, drought haunted the 1950s, again reducing crop yields. From 1949 to 1959, the average income of family farms in Montana continued to fall, even as postwar industry and consumerism rose.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, while the national economy boomed, out on the High Line the McLaughlin farm put food on the table but yielded neither security nor plenty. And so McLaughlin’s family lived in a world apart, where income went toward farm equipment rather than store-bought furniture, property taxes rather than sleek cars, and veterinary bills rather than toys for the children. McLaughlin’s mother personified a strategy common to farm and ranch women; their home production reduced the need for cash expenditure, often making the difference between economic survival and insolvency. McLaughlin’s mother sewed clothes, curtains, and bedding, doctored the family at home, and gave home haircuts; canned or boxed goods like powdered milk were her only concessions to consumerism. Despite such economy, fewer and fewer farmers like the McLaughlins hung on. By 1960, more Montanans lived in the cities than in rural areas.<sup>13</sup>

In “Hunger,” McLaughlin describes an economy of scarcity that leaves family members wanting. Even rare opportunities for a big meal create pain when the children gorge themselves, eating long after their stomachs are full. And yet McLaughlin steers clear of pity, for she also remembers a kind of comfort, moments when she felt an inchoate trust that things were alright in her world. “Something mean in our family was suspended when we squeezed around the table for a meal,” she writes. Here she uses the word “mean” not to indicate malice but to refer to the constant husbanding of resources that dogged every move her parents made. She speaks again of that respite from worry on Sunday afternoons in winter, when her parents brought them to Grandma’s for dinner: “I felt snug as the chickens in their house. . . . An edge between Dad and Dwight was absent. Our parents and grandparents mostly ignored us kids; still I felt carried along on the current of their mysterious grownup ways. In the crowded room I inhaled our warm bodies’ scent, pungent as cellar apples.”

By 1968, the farmscape on the northern plains had profoundly changed. Gone were the innumerable



Courtesy Ruth McLaughlin

**Author Ruth McLaughlin poses with her family on a visit to the farm of Charles and Ella Hawkins, her maternal grandparents, in July 1954. From left to right are Ruth, her brother Dwight Alexander, father and mother Bill and Norma Alexander, and sister Rosemary Alexander.**



small outfits of 1910. In the late sixties, corporations holding ten thousand-plus acres held 71 percent of the land, though they made up roughly 8 percent of all farms in Montana. One by one, family members left the farm, and gradually, the impress of human will on the landscape faded. Brother Dwight lit out for California and Ruth headed to Missoula, to attend the University of Montana. From 1960 to 1970, forty of Montana's fifty-six counties lost population, with the highest proportions in rural areas. As McLaughlin's parents grew frail in their old age, their hold on the farm weakened. Following her mother's death, her father let go of the farm. By the 1990s, the clapboard home was collapsing, and native grasses had reclaimed the property. In a reversal of first-generation triumphal narratives, the settlers retreated.<sup>14</sup>

Withal these changes, McLaughlin resists the traps of nostalgia and bitterness, reaching deeper than impoverishment and loss. She writes to the slow cadence of childhood on a farm, evoking sensual memories—sky like a “blue bowl,” fence posts worn smooth where a milk cow rubbed her neck, her mother's “victory cake” dense with raisins. What for McLaughlin are childhood memories were for her parents a life's work. She makes palpable her parents' devotion to the land, interwoven with their marriage and inextricable from their commitment to

each other. Like the native prairie grasses that become McLaughlin's guiding metaphor, their roots grew thick and tangled beneath the soil with a strength that held fast against damaging winds but hindered other kinds of growth. At times baffled and angered by her parents' dogged fidelity to the farm, McLaughlin also finds compassion for them, “a generation trapped between adventurous parents and discontented children.” Their job, she writes, “was to hold onto the idea that hail-battered, drought-struck small farms could support a family.”<sup>15</sup>

The family farm and the western homestead are emblematic of an older world, a nineteenth-century sensibility in which there was no alienation of labor; one worked for oneself and reaped the dignity of economic success. But if the Jeffersonian model informed homesteading, it failed on the northern plains. McLaughlin's memoir is distinctive in that she offers another narrative, one that proceeds from intimate knowledge of a hardscrabble farm in mid-twentieth-century Montana. Through the unflinching gaze of a generation who defected, McLaughlin conveys love of family and place as well as frustration with their limits. In her honesty we glimpse the texture and preoccupations of rural Montana during a period of profound change that altered places on the map and places in the mind.

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# HUNGER

**In 1904**, when my mother's father stepped off the train at Culbertson, he was among the area's first homesteaders. He staked a 160-acre claim east of town, in long glacial hills reminding me in childhood of slumbering animals. North of him was Indian land, and above that Dutch Henry roamed, hiding stolen horses in rough hills below the Canadian border. South of my grandfather's land—enlarged to 640 acres as others starved out—was a rancher who resented settlers closing the open range. Farther south was the Missouri River.

My twenty-four-year-old grandfather wasn't new to America—he'd stepped out of a reeking ship's hold from Sweden eight years before, first trying his hand at the fur-dressing trade before succumbing to James J. Hill's vision of cozy farms tucked in prairie

hills. My grandfather's name was new: before heading west he'd anglicized Kyrle Hakkansson to Charles Hawkins.

In St. Paul, my eighteen-year-old grandmother, betrothed to Charles, waited to join him. “How I envy you being outdoors all the time breathing pure air,” Ella Flink wrote from her housemaid's attic room. “You and I can dance in that lovely air.”

In 1908, she arrived to learn there would be little time for dancing. She planted a large garden, cared for cattle and chickens, and helped harvest wheat in fields carved from prairie sod, hardly pausing for six pregnancies in a dozen years. Three of her youngest four children were dead at birth or shortly after. The last one, my mother, born at home like the others, was thin and not expected to survive. Because of that, or



**Both of Ruth McLaughlin's grandfathers homesteaded in the Culbertson area of northeast Montana. Here, grandfather William A. Alexander shingles the roof of his homestead shack near Mona in 1913.**

perhaps because of three tiny graves in the pasture, my grandmother did not take an interest in the new child, leaving it in the care of the baby's nine- and eleven-year-old sisters while she returned to outdoor work. The girls resented their chore; my mother remembered spending much of her childhood alone.

My grandparents hung on through the drought of the 'teens and the Dirty Thirties as neighbors fled and only Russian thistle thrived. My grandfather did not stop farming till age eighty-nine. In sixty-five years, he hadn't made much money. He did not question that, or the suffering that the hard work and privation had caused his family. He was the tough, take-it-on-the-chin homesteader that our northeastern corner of the state likes to recall.

My father's father, William Alexander, was of a different stripe. In 1913, at age forty-six, he had a whopper of a midlife crisis and decided, in Morristown, Minnesota, to throw over his job as superintendent of schools to homestead land. My genteel grandmother Mary, a former teacher in his school, packed up daughter Mary, age three, and Bill, age five, and followed William to a claim in rough, eroded hills south of the Missouri River at Culbertson. The soil was rocky and thin, better suited for grazing—my grandfather had chosen the land near Mona not for its soil but for its sweeping views. My grandmother sat up nights killing bedbugs that had arrived in the

new pine boards of their shack. She learned how to “pick” cow chips for fuel on the treeless land: if she flipped one over to find it still wormy beneath, it was not yet “ripe.” She lasted six years, then left home to teach in a one-room school seven miles across prairie hills. She took her daughter with her, leaving nine-year-old Bill to be raised by his stern father. Like my mother consigned to the care of older sisters, my father spent much of his childhood alone. The legacy of that abandonment was his inability to nurture his own children. For some homestead offspring, the cost of conquering a new land was high.

My grandmother taught thirty-two years in the Danielson, Girard, Ridgelawn, Blue Hill, Mona, and Lee schools, sleeping in a bed alongside desks where there was no teacherage. She retired in 1951 to a house in Culbertson, persuading William to join her. The claim was sold to a neighbor who demolished the homestead shack and hauled the barn and chicken house to his own land. No vestige of the farm remains.

My parents were the issue of these four settlers. They graduated from high school in 1928 and 1936—and then stayed home. On every third homestead or so in our valley, a child—often the youngest or shyest, most aware of how hard it would be for aging parents to manage the farm alone—followed that pattern of remaining on the farm. In my family, my mother commuted to an office job in town, and after work

**Grandmother Mary Alexander taught in area schools for thirty-two years. She is pictured here with students at the Mona School in May 1924.**



All photos courtesy Ruth McLaughlin

**Ruth's childhood home after a late spring snowstorm, April 1961**

milked cows, stacked hay, and hauled grain. Over six years, she used her salary to buy up failed homesteads east of the Hawkins farm; she and my father moved onto this land after their 1943 marriage. They toughed out fifty-two years on the 430-acre spread—good-sized in my youth. They obediently lived the lives of their parents, raising grain and cattle; my mother sold cream and eggs in town. Our knot of Herefords swelled and shrank depending on whether drought, hail, or grasshoppers had claimed our crops: in bad years we sold cows for cash to survive.

My brother and I, born in 1946 and '47, are the surviving members of this family, outlasting our troubled

older sister Rosemary, and also outlasting our farm. Like most of the farms of our '50s and '60s neighbors, it lies empty. Our generation heard the siren song to go where life was easier, and money could be made without drought and hail and grasshoppers waiting to spring. Dwight and I felt our parents' keen disappointment at our leaving.

Dwight went all the way to California. We've thought we lacked our parents' toughness. Or were our parents not tough, merely hardened by circumstance? We can't remember receiving affection in childhood. Dwight recalls being expected to work like a man at twelve years old. I wince at memories of my parents' bafflement towards my sister's emotional illness. They didn't see the need to seek help: why couldn't Rosemary just shrug off trouble, pick herself up and go on.

Something mean in our family was suspended when we squeezed around the table for a meal. We kids arrived for dinner and supper with an exquisite hunger: the last meal had been served five hours before. We waited as our mother ferried steaming dishes to the round table, then we hunched over faded Melmac plates on which no smear or scrap of food would remain. No one said he liked or hated anything; no one was admonished to eat less or more. My father in overalls ate swiftly, fueling himself for the fields; in winter he readied himself to fork hay and break stock tank ice. I bumped Rosemary's elbow on the cracked oilcloth. My father on my left bumped mine. We weren't a family of touchers, no hugs, kisses,



**Norma Alexander, Ruth's mother, on her round of chicken and garden chores, April 1963**

tucks goodnight, though when my father was struck by a humorous story—something plucked from his blighted childhood—he might rest a plate-sized hand on my mother's shoulder. Occasionally it landed like a soft claw on mine.

My sister and I sat against the wall, flanked by the deep freeze and dusty mirrored buffet. I averted my eyes from the slop pail wedged beneath the washstand shelf, and alongside it the puddle rags—damp, reptilian—waiting to smear away mud or manure tracked in the door. I could ignore the oilcloth abrading my bare arms, and my family's sweat smell. My mother's cooking was even a drug for prickly Rosemary, silent at meals. Only Dwight at times broke the trance, inquiring why we couldn't have tuna noodle casserole, sloppy Joes, or spaghetti like school friends. Most of the year, noon and night, we ate an unvarying menu that Dwight called peasant food: mashed potatoes, canned vegetables, and processed meat. My mother lifted her eyes to stare at him across the table. She didn't disagree, but I knew it wouldn't happen.

Below us, beneath the scuffed linoleum of the kitchen floor, a thousand pounds of potatoes lay in dirt. My father planted fifty pounds of seed potatoes in spring, then we ate the harvest all year long as if we were part of the potato life cycle. Our two dogs shared leftovers, and the chickens—who like my brother seemed always restless, hungry—ate the peels. The potatoes lasted well through winter in the cellar's dank air. In summer, they began to sprout, but my mother rehabilitated their soft and wizened bodies into family meals.



**Rosemary, Dwight, and Ruth on the farmhouse front step after their baths, 1951**

Our cows didn't provide us with steak; they were sold in fall for cash. Instead, we were allowed a single frankfurter—the fat red ones were my favorite, burst open from the coal stove's heat—or one baloney slice. I loaded up on mashed potatoes. Finally our mother rose to carry in dessert, crowning all our plain meals and comprising half of her three-by-five recipe cards, velvety from overuse, inside their tin box. Dishes of chocolate, butterscotch, or tapioca pudding had a cookie or square of cake tipped into each. On Monday, wash day, when she hadn't time to cook, rice, milk, raisins and eggs baked themselves to pudding in the oven. We had blonde and chocolate brownies, yellow and chocolate cakes. Sunday we had Jell-O with fruit cocktail; Dwight and I tried to guess the identities of fruit in dice-like squares. We had servings of our farm's own fruit almost each day: rhubarb sauce, pie, crisp, or crunch.

In the middle of winter when the chickens refused to lay eggs, huddling instead on their roosts, some falling dead from cold, we ate eggless, sugarless victory cake from a faded recipe in the box. The honey-sweetened loaf was chewy with raisins and dense; I felt myself in a dark time my mother still spoke of wonderingly: of Roosevelt on the radio, ration books,





**Hawkins farm, seven miles east of Culbertson, looking north, circa 1958. In the foreground are the Great Northern Railway tracks and Montana Highway 2. Charles Hawkins planted by hand every tree in the farm's shelterbelts.**

and when the tall neighbor boy, a cut-up in school, vanished forever on the fields of distant France.

Winter was our season of abundant milk, the milk cow freshening; my mother tried new recipes clipped from *Ladies Home Journal* and *Dakota Farmer*, our two magazines. She made blanchmange, pronouncing it “blank maynge.” I was sure that the pale, bland pudding’s name derived from its resemblance to shining bald spots of disease on cats and cows.

When the milk cow gave birth on clean straw in the barn, we said good-bye to months of powdered milk and welcomed whipped cream on our desserts. We also said hello to chocolate mousse. “Chocolate mouse,” Mother called it; the color recalled mice darting in darkness when we entered sheds and the barn.

We had to be patient for new milk. The milk cow’s calf had to suck the first antibody-rich colostrum without which he would not survive. Then he was penned out of sight from his mother at the far end of the barn and when the weather warmed staked inside our yard. It was my job in summer to mix up

a powdered replacement in the nipple bucket, then brace myself as the calf rushed toward it, strangling himself at the chain’s end. The calf gave little butts as he sucked, as I’d seen calves in the pasture do toward their mothers. All day long he would lunge toward me at even my empty-handed approach, rubbing his face on my jeans as I scratched his head. Beneath the collar his neck was hairless, not from mange but from straining forward on his chain. In the pasture, calves idly nosed into soft udders and stood patiently as mothers tongued along their backs swirling hair into “cowlicks.” After rubbing the staked calf’s head a few minutes, I would grow impatient and pull away. It did not occur to me that we had stolen more from the calf than breakfast milk and cream for French desserts.

Once a year we drank bitter milk. Biscuitroot appeared early in spring, its sunny yellow flowers waving high above dull grass. The milk cow preferred it. Then the prairie dried, the weeds shrank, and ordinary grass prevailed. But for weeks we drank



**Charles and Ella Hawkins posed in 1963 in front of the log house Charles built in 1904.**

bad milk. It fouled our cereal; I even thought I could taste it in the cold pancakes we kids ate, leftovers from our parents' dawn breakfast. Rosemary, Dwight, and I begged Mother to make milk from the Carnation box on the cupboard shelf. She poured herself a drink of milk from the refrigerator's Mason jar and swore she couldn't taste anything. Only when we refused milk at meals and ate our Cornflakes dry did she break down and mix up bland, delicious powdered milk.

In summer, fresh vegetables appeared on our table: brilliant green peas that Mother boiled with a single pod to intensify the flavor, giant beets she cooked whole—sometimes for an hour or more—then slipped from their skins onto our plates. They bled sweetly as we carved them like steak.

At a certain time of summer, just for a week or two, we had field corn in its milky, infant stage; Dwight and I rushed to gather it as Mother heated water in the giant canner for our meal. We picked three ears apiece for our sister, mother, and father, then six or seven each for the two of us. We would eat them all and remain rail thin. We stripped the corn of husks and silk, which we dumped outside the fence on the ash pile where nothing grew. A cow browsing along the dry prairie would discover it. She wolfed down each morsel of the fresh, green shucks, then suffered diarrhea that we had to be alert for outside the yard fence.

The season was brief; corn soon hardened to its dent stage. Our father shelled the kernels and then



**Ruth with calf tethered in the backyard, 1955**



**Ruth and Dwight in the front yard with Bullet and Nip, November 1960**

fed them through the ancient grinder, once belonging to his father, bolted to the granary floor. In winter months, our teeth crackled like gravel on our mother's cornbread.

One winter when I was seven, I was eating supper at the table, soaking up the heat from the food and from the nearby coal stove—at its zenith in late afternoon—when I suddenly thought hard about peas.





**Williston, North Dakota, was about a fifty-mile drive from the Alexander farm located ten miles east of Culbertson, Montana. In the 1950s and 1960s, Williston was the area's marketing center, where the Alexanders made large purchases such as cars, appliances, and farm machinery. Ruth remembered "crossing and recrossing Main Street to compare toys on Woolworth's and Ben Franklin's low shelves." The Woolworth store is seen in the circa 1959 photograph above.**

I studied the canned peas on my plate, pale and soft atop dinner's leftover mashed potatoes on which they had been heated. I liked canned peas, collapsing in my mouth with a salty tang, exotic as far-off California from which they had arrived. They were different from our own plump peas on summer vines. But I suddenly understood that the peas before me were the same as our own bright green peas we kids rushed to gather, shelling them as our mother boiled water. Their intensity of taste rivaled dessert.

It wasn't just our Wednesday peas, I realized at that moment, but the little bullets of cubed beets we ate on Fridays were once the same huge beets we plucked early in the mornings in late summer, shaking off garden dirt. All our summer and winter vegetables were the same. Around me my parents and brother and sister bent industriously over their plates, as if each was cultivating a tiny acre. The world suddenly felt small.

Once or twice a year our family ate out, always at the Farmer's Union Co-op Cafeteria in Williston across the Dakota line. We climbed the rickety stairs above the Co-op Grocery after a morning of shop-

ping—for me crossing and recrossing Main Street to compare toys on Woolworth's and Ben Franklin's low shelves. We kids were allowed hamburgers, which Dwight and I made a meal: first we ate the buttery top bun, then each piquant pickle; finally we carved the meat and bottom bun with fork and knife.

Our real treat of eating out was with our Hawkins grandparents, where we were often invited for holidays and in the slow season of winter for Sunday meals. We already ate there most Saturdays, just a snack following our trip to bathe in their indoor bathroom. "Bath lunch," our grandmother called it, loading cookies onto a plate to our mother's mild protests. Grandma said that we children were "depleted" by our weekly bath, making me feel weak on the couch where I waited for the crackle of cellophane on pantry shelves.

Grandma's cookies were store-bought. She rarely baked them because she was arthritic, or perhaps because Dwight and I could easily down a dozen each. I loved town cookies—Vienna Fingers and Dutch Windmills in fancy shapes, and my favorite, a round wafer topped by a pink marshmallow sponge.

Dwight and I ate quickly, competing. Also on the table was a pitcher of lukewarm Kool-Aid, prepared hastily; speckles of flavor, like jewels, rested on its sandy sugar bottom. My brother and I strategically filled and refilled our glasses, trying to be the winner of the pitcher's final sweet swill.

My brother and I prepared for dinner at our grandparents' by going light on breakfast pancakes, surprising our mother, but delighting the recipients of leftovers, Bullet and Nip, who gulped pancakes down whole. Just before noon we stepped outside into frigid air and crossed the rutted yard with its remains of snow. We squeezed into our car—always a used one whose out-of-style profile advertised our family's modest means. We owned a slope-backed '49 Chevrolet in 1953 when box-like cars were in; when we could afford a '53, new models were long and sleek.

Dad drove in slow motion, turning west onto the narrow highway and following its quiet length three miles until he turned up the alley of windbreak trees and parked at its end. We spilled from the car and seated ourselves at our grandparents' table, round like our own. I was ravenous.

My grandmother trudged carrying dishes from the narrow counter and coal stove: mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, packaged sweet rolls, Jell-O salad, two freshly killed and roasted chickens, and also gravy which my mother, who did not like it, seldom made.

In the cramped kitchen, yellow like ours with pink instead of green linoleum below, we bowed our heads in a kind of worship over crowded plates and began.

Food was serious, we knew. Dad could access memories of near-starvation in the drought of the 'teens on his father's marginal homestead. In the 1918–19



Bill Shernory, photographer, William E. (Bill) Shernory Photograph Collection, Williston State College Foundation, Williston, North Dakota, 1-31B-70-1

Every year the Alexanders attended the annual Band Day Parade in Williston, pictured here in 1961, in which all the bands from surrounding towns in Montana and North Dakota marched. The Ben Franklin is visible on the right and the Woolworth's sign is on the upper left.



winter, the family subsisted on “graveyard stew”—vegetables softening in the cellar. My nine-year-old father fainted at school, “a kind of spasm” Grandfather noted in his diary. Dad developed sores on his arms that would not heal. Grandfather detailed that year’s Thanksgiving menu: jackrabbit hash, string beans, bread dripped in Karo syrup, cucumber pickles, carrot pie, and tea. He later wrote: “We quit eating jacks when I found they had tapeworms.”

From her perch on a stool at the cluttered counter, Grandma entreated us to eat more. She rose to offer the last of the sweet potatoes to my father but he waved her off, stirring his coffee and gazing past us out the window, his prelude to falling into silent brooding or erupting with a funny tale.

## **Grandfather detailed that year’s Thanksgiving menu: jackrabbit hash, string beans, bread dripped in Karo syrup, cucumber pickles, carrot pie, and tea.**

Dwight and I ate steadily. Even in our parents’ penurious household good eating was aligned with health and strength. On my third and final helping, I spread mashed potatoes to the plate’s rim and troweled on thick milk gravy.

My mother and grandmother rose to wash dishes, talking calmly, mysteriously able to dip hands into the sizzling water in pans on the hot stove. At last everyone retreated to the living room. Grandma settled into her wooden rocker; she and my mother continued a desultory conversation. My father and grandfather sat opposite on a chair and couch, Grandpa occasionally managing to penetrate Dad’s thoughts and start a conversation. Rosemary, usually calm after meals, paged through old magazines.

Dwight and I bundled up and stepped outside. Sun glittered on snow. We went to view tracks in the windbreak—deer, rabbit, mice, sometimes a porcupine whose tail swept the snow like a broom. We peeked into sheds and barns. We looked at machinery identical to our own, but because it was not our own it had a kind of freshness.

Our machinery, in sheds and in a row inside the windbreak, I thought of as brooding, benign animals, but Dwight saw something more. He seemed to look

into the coursing heart of our machines; his breath slowed. Machinery was part of something wrong between Dad and Dwight. Even when Dwight was small, he would not concede our father’s quick anger toward farm implements, how Dad fell to cursing a crippled engine as if it were a dumb beast refusing to obey.

We opened the low chicken house door to feel the warmth of compact white bodies crowded on roosts; our nostrils filled with the droppings’ acrid smell. Chickens looked at us piercingly.

Indoors again, Dwight and I lay along the walls of the living room on its thin carpet, waiting for the pain in our stomachs to pass. Conversation drifted, rising out of long silence and absorbed by it again.

Mother and Grandma traded weekly letters from Aunt Claire in California, a single typed page to each. They were dense with minutiae of Claire’s life: meals prepared, the headaches of elementary teaching, her lucky purchase of a bushel of pears to put up in jars, the seldom-changing desert weather.

Mother lowered her letter with a dreamy, absorbed look, as if she had been in the actual presence of plump, bright-lipsticked Claire.

I felt snug as the chickens in their house. Town, where angry blowups by Rosemary drew stares, seemed distant. An edge between Dad and Dwight was absent. Our parents and grandparents mostly ignored us kids; still I felt carried along on the current of their mysterious grownup ways. In the crowded room, I inhaled our warm bodies’ scent, pungent as cellar apples.

Three hours after dinner Grandma rose and, after mice-like rustling in the kitchen, called us to eat again. She had spread her tropical-flowered “lunch cloth” on the table, and placed dishes of Jell-O with ice cream around. Cookies waited on a plate. I wasn’t hungry again, but I squeezed between my parents on a chair.

Though our grandparents provided sumptuous meals—smells of dinner still hung in the air as we hiked up our chairs for Jell-O lunch—after fifty years of farming they were still poor. They had held on through the ’teens when half of new settlers left the state—disabused of the notion that rain follows the plow—and through the Dirty Thirties. Those



Ruth recalled, “Our real treat of eating out was with our Hawkins grandparents, where we were often invited for holidays and in the slow season of winter for Sunday meals.” Here, sharing Christmas dinner in 1960, are (left to right) Norma, Bill, Ruth, and Rosemary Alexander, and, behind the table on the right, grandparents Ella and Charlie Hawkins.

who remained practiced “diversified farming”—hedging bets between cattle and wheat.

My grandparents never traded up their furniture or bought a nice car. My grandfather’s overalls wore patches. Grandma darned socks at night with a glossy black darning egg inserted into heel or toe. But her meals did not suggest lack or want.

My parents slowly spooned up Jell-O and dripping ice cream; Dwight and I cleared the cookie plate. Then we rose and packed ourselves into the car again and arrived at the familiarity of home. The dogs, hysterical, greeted us. Sometimes when we had been gone all day they could not express how much they had missed us, could not bear to meet us as we exited the car. Our black dog Bullet hurled himself around the yard, his golden mother following, diving at imaginary sparrows—shadows of fence posts on snow.

At home, I felt ill. But underlying was the pleasure of abundance: something in our lives had been not too little but too much. After awhile, my brother and I would take turns visiting the outhouse with diarrhea. Or, like the cows that accidentally stumbled on the sweet green remains of corn, we relieved ourselves in the pasture coulee.

When I slipped into bed that night, my stomach was calm. I didn’t regret the feast of the day.

Our mother didn’t cook big feasts; even holiday dinners had a parsimonious stamp. We usually had meatloaf, precarved in narrow slices, and never sweet rolls or cookies from town. Rarely gravy. My brother recalls a turkey dinner of a turkey drumstick we all

shared. Later, Bullet and Nip fought over the splintery bone.

My mother’s sweet tooth prompted her sole extravagance. On Sundays in winter, she made fudge, and once a year at Christmas she made fudge, butter-scotch, white divinity, and penuche—brown sugar fudge with cream. She fed us candy at intervals on our holiday vacation from school. Sometimes the fudge didn’t harden, and she served it on a spoon: Rosemary, Dwight and I, seated on the couch, leaned like baby sparrows toward her fudge-heaped spoon. For Christmas, we wouldn’t receive toy guitars, Tonka trucks, or electric trains. For me, a Betsy Wetsy doll never appeared. Once I got a rubber ball unconcealed in paper wrapping, and in high school Kleenex and cold cream. I remember few other Christmas gifts, but I remember Mother’s candy.

In his teens, Dwight declared that our parents lacked ambition; our father worked hard but not smart. He said that Mother worked harder at being cheap than she did raising chickens or her garden. I knew he might be right, but I hated the criticism. Our parents kept afloat on what they had. I kept afloat on their approval. Dwight could not change that. When he left home he worked and saved smart by living in a California flophouse hotel while pouring most of what he earned into real estate.

He treated us to dinner on one visit home—not at the Farmers Union Cafeteria or even at the new Skelly Truck Stop at Williston’s edge but at the barnlike State Line Club still straddling the prairie

where Montana and North Dakota meet. The club served cocktails, prime rib, and shrimp, familiar to us from television. The “Longest Bar in the Northwest” extended into the dining room where only a couple of people sat on a Wednesday night, making it seem longer. But even in the empty room, our parents weren’t at ease. Dad ordered a hamburger steak, the cheapest meal; Mother inquired of Dwight if she could have her usual bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich. Dwight acquiesced but told me he felt like his hard-earned money was wasted; he’d wanted our family to just once feel worthy of a good meal.

When I first lived on my own, waitressing in Missoula following a college year, I tried to imitate family meals. I boiled potatoes—as much for their aroma and their gurgle in the pan as for their taste. I discovered vivid green frozen peas, a facsimile of fresh.

I returned from work in late afternoon and slipped off my white nylon dress to lie in my darkened room. I was glad to earn money in Missoula and glad to escape the heat of outdoor work and kitchen chores. But all my days of waitressing seemed depressingly the same.

That summer, I felt inside me the slow shift of chores at home: tall grass cut in June, raked into windrows and stacked; in July, weeds disked in fallow fields, and lawn-like new wheat sprayed for grasshoppers. Finally, in August harvest began, often on the sixth, Dwight’s birthday.

I ate what I wanted after work and gained weight. I found a store that carried fat red franks, and downed

three or four at once. I bought half gallons of ice cream that I spooned from the box, huddled in bed to keep warm. I’d never had more than two scoops at once on top of Jell-O. Trembling from cold, my lips and tongue numb, I stopped just short of finishing the carton.

I could finally have all the ice cream that I wanted, I could turn bright red from franks (my brother maintains that the nitrates in our years of processed meat will keep us pink in our coffins long past death). But neither restored my depleted self as had my grandmother’s bath lunch.

Now, on visits to the empty farm, I struggle to see clearly. I don’t want Aunt Claire’s shifting memory. Her love of the 1970s *Little House on the Prairie* television series, a feel-good upgrade of the Laura Ingalls Wilder books, gave my mother a slow burn. Claire wrote from California that the well-scrubbed characters’ small failures and large triumphs reminded her of home. Mother said, “I don’t remember it that way at all.”

On Sundays with my grandparents, I was content; I didn’t hunger for anything more. Rosemary’s anger would erupt again in town or school, and a mood of worry might lower over my parents as soon as we reached home. But for a time worry was absent. I felt intertwined in the net of family. Like the long roots of prairie grass, adapted to survive drought and shredding hailstorms, we were bound together.

I still like potatoes that I tug in brown plastic bags into my grocery cart. I am relieved to be away from the

**The Alexander children attended elementary and high school in Culbertson, Montana (right, circa 1962).**



Courtesy Tom Mulvaney

heat and sweat and sunburn of hoeing and knocking off potato bugs, but these potatoes seem like orphans, far from the fields in which they grew.

Links of community were broken by my generation's refusal to follow in our forebears' footsteps. My Hawkins grandparents homesteaded near Norwegians Halfen and Maggie Bjorge. The couples were lifelong friends; their children played together in the 'teens and twenties, skipping across the prairie to each other's homes. In the 1930s, my mother piled into a jalopy to drive the oiled dirt road to high school in town with Robert Bjorge, who would take over the Bjorge homestead. In the 1960s, I rode to school on a rumbling yellow school bus along paved Highway 2 with Tom Bjorge, Robert's son. After graduation, Tom remained but began driving a truck and moved to town. Now, though I've swung by the tall Bjorge house on visits home, parking to stare at its abandoned, mournful state, I haven't seen Tom since our 1965 graduation. Of Dwight's class of '64, one remained behind, a farmer's son who lives in town and drives a school bus and delivers mail. Of my twenty-two classmates, two stayed, also farmers' sons; neither works the land.

Northeastern Montana is "next year country," where hope is the anodyne. My generation's fleeing destroyed one hope: that small farms could support a family in a drought-plagued land. The one that replaced it is large-scale farming, aided by the government's Conservation Reserve Program that pays landowners to retire marginal land to grass.

I visit home to watch time reverse. As big landowners of two thousand acres—now the Roosevelt County farm average—tear down fences and demolish abandoned farm buildings, the land seems vast again. As it did in my grandparents' eyes when they stepped off the train in Culbertson a hundred years ago. As it did when settlers in our county turned over eight hundred thousand acres of virgin prairie.

Recently, in conversation with a young man in the Culbertson area, I asked what was going on in farming. "Everyone wants ten thousand acres," he said.

He didn't know if big landowners were succeeding; they had to be carrying debt on the large equipment: a 300-horsepower tractor with GPS and hydraulics to fine-tune the depth of soil tillage costs nearly three hundred thousand dollars. The man said he'd tried farming himself before selling out to a



Courtesy Ruth McLaughlin

**Ruth, age thirteen, and Dwight, age fourteen, wait for the bus on the first day of school, September 1960.**

brother; since then his piece of ground has changed hands two more times.

A new generation, a new hunger for land. The fourth generation's quest for ten thousand acres is just an updated version of the homesteaders' dream a century ago.

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## Notes

### Hunger

1. For a good discussion of Montana in Farm Security Administration photographs, see Mary Murphy, *Hope in Hard Times: New Deal Photographs of Montana, 1936–1942* (Helena, Mont., 2003).

2. For examples of the literature about and by the first generation of homesteaders, see Sarah Carter, *Montana Women Homesteaders: A Field of One's Own* (Helena, Mont., 2009); Marcia Meredith Hensley, *Staking Her Claim: Women Homesteading the West* (Glendo, Wyo., 2008); Percy Wollaston, *Homesteading: A Montana Family Album* (New York, 1997); Daniel N. Vichorek, *Montana's Homestead Era* (Helena, Mont., 1987); Mary W. M. Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains, 1900–1925* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957); Leonard Fiske, *Montana Homestead Days* (self-published, 2005); and Paul Buchanan, *Growing Up in the Big Sag: Memoirs of the John and Lula Buchanan Family in Montana* (Springfield, Va., 1986). Journal articles include Seena B. Kohl, “‘Well I Have Lived in Montana Almost a Week and like It Fine’: Letters from the Davis Homestead, 1910–1926,” *Montana The Magazine of Western History* (hereafter *Montana*), 51 (Autumn 2001), 32–45; Sverre Arestad, “Pioneering in Montana,” *Norwegian-American Studies*, 22 (Jan. 1965), 104–43; Henry T. Murray, “Neighbors Helping Neighbors: Threshing in the Judith Basin, 1908–1920,” *Montana*, 37 (Winter 1987), 56–59; and Dorothy Kimball, “Alone on the Prairie . . . : The Homestead Narrative of Nellie Rogney,” *Montana*, 33 (Autumn 1983), 52–62.

3. A few memoirs and creative non-fiction works address the experience of later generations during the mid- and late twentieth century. See Mary Clearman Blew, *All But the Waltz: A Memoir of*

*Five Generations in the Life of a Montana Family* (Norman, Okla., 2001); Ivan Doig, *This House of Sky: Landscapes of the Western Mind* (New York, 1978); Dale Eunson, *Up on the Rim* (Helena, Mont., 2003); Nedra Sterry, *When the Meadowlark Sings: The Story of a Montana Family* (Helena, Mont., 2003); Jonathan Raban, *Bad Land: An American Romance* (New York, 1996); and Judy Blunt, *Breaking Clean* (New York, 2002). For a history of the aftermath of the homesteading years, see Mary W. M. Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains: Years of Readjustment, 1920–1990* (Lawrence, Kans., 1993)

4. Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (1953; repr., New York, 1992), 220; Gary Libecap, “Learning about the Weather: Dry-farming Doctrine and Homestead Failure in Eastern Montana, 1900–1925,” *Montana*, 52 (Spring 2002), 24–33; 25. See also Ralph Ward, “Wheat in Montana: Determined Adaptation,” *Montana*, 25 (Autumn 1975), 16–37.

5. Zeynep Kocabiyik Hansen and Gary Libecap, “‘Rain Follows the Plow’ and Dryfarming Doctrine: The Climate Information Problem and Homestead Failure in the Upper Great Plains, 1890–1925,” *Explorations in Economic History*, 41 (Apr. 2004), 86–120, 86–87; Libecap, “Learning about the Weather,” 32, 25.

6. Hansen and Libecap, “Rain Follows the Plow,” 88, 98.

7. *Ibid.*, 92.

8. Murphy, *Hope in Hard Times*, 34. For discussion of summer fallow, see Ward, “Wheat in Montana,” 18–19; and Hansen and Libecap, “Rain Follows the Plow,” 101, 114.

9. Severe droughts hit Montana in 1931, ’33, ’34, ’36, and ’37. Ward, “Wheat in Montana,” 25. See also Harold Hal-

crow, “The Problem of the Unsuccessful Dry Farm in the Northern Great Plains” (master’s thesis, Montana State College, Bozeman, 1938), cited in Hansen and Libecap, “Rain Follows the Plow,” 113.

10. Murphy, *Hope in Hard Times*, 44–72, 45 (map); Merrill Burlingame, “Contributions of the Montana Extension Service,” *Agricultural History: Agriculture on the Great Plains, 1876–1936: A Symposium*, 51 (Jan. 1977), 229–43. See also Ward, “Wheat in Montana,” 28.

11. Richard White, *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West* (Norman, Okla., 1991), 520; Ward, “Wheat in Montana,” 32; Carla Homstad, “Two Roads Diverged: A Look Back at the Montana Study,” *Montana*, 53 (Autumn 2003), 16–29, 18.

12. White, *It’s Your Misfortune*, 497–502, 520. Drought held farmers hostage in 1949, ’52–’57, and ’59–’60. See Michael Malone, Richard Roeder, and William Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, rev. ed. (Seattle, Wash., 1991), 320.

13. Laurie Mercier, “‘You Had to Make Every Minute Count’: Women’s Role in Montana Agriculture,” *Montana* (Autumn 1988), 50–61, 52; Homstad, “Two Roads Diverged,” 28.

14. White, *It’s Your Misfortune*, 520, 28.

15. Ruth McLaughlin, *Bound Like Grass* (Norman, Okla., 2010), 68.