

Meet Montana: News from the Last Best Place

By Jackie Brennan

In a vast landlocked region of America well west of Virginia, the ratio of cows to people is roughly three to one, and some counties boast as many as twenty cows for every person. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the human population in this place has yet to surpass a million (U.S. Census). That figure dispersed over 146,000 square miles allots a square mile to every 6.8 residents. For the sake of comparison, the national population density is 87.4 persons per square mile (U.S. Census). All million inhabitants and three million cows are represented by exactly one area code, 406. I proudly hail from this great and strange place, labeled Montana on most recent U.S. maps.

Our nicknames include The Last Best Place, The Big Sky State, The Treasure State, or most simply, The 406—all are equally descriptive. To be clear, secondhand descriptions of Montana cannot do it justice, but I will venture to at least justify the nicknames and summarize some of its oddities. First and foremost, anything below mile high is considered low elevation, and baking is a lost cause unless a high altitude recipe is used. People either live in town, or out of town. There is none of this “living in the country” rubbish that Easterners try to defend. Typically, there exists one route and one route only to get to a destination. People who live out of town might live many miles apart and still consider each other neighbors.

A place doesn't need a post office to be identified as a town, but it definitely needs a bar. Why a bar? We understand that our state's winters are long and bitter, and that wayfaring strangers invariably need a place to unwind. A bar has notably greater social promise for a wanderer than a post office, and financially, it's just a more practical investment. It's only logical to turn a profit when furnishing accommodations in the middle of nowhere, which is essentially what the majority of Montana is. This said, the smallest towns host the biggest rodeos, and the rodeo grounds are usually the first and last things you see driving through.

Among the three finest gems extracted from The Treasure State over the years are the world's most iconic daredevil, the single most famous painter of the American West, and two U.S. legislators who exercised enough integrity while in office to remain historically anonymous. The mining city of Butte has at least one claim to fame; it is the proud hometown of none other than Evel Knievel (never mind that it was the world's leading copper producer in the late nineteenth century, or that its crime rates and mining accidents are partially responsible for any decline in the U.S. immigrant population around the same time) (“The Butte Copper Mines”). Charles Marion Russell is our artistic representative, which prompts me to offer a disclaimer. There's an abiding misconception that the populace of the northwest United States is illiterate and incapable of appreciating the products of greater intellectual processes, like art. This may be the case for the Dakotas, Idaho, or even Wyoming (did we ever truly agree that Jackson Pollock was an artist?), but it's not true of Montana. Because Charlie Russell was really the first of our breed to defy the stereotype, we consider him a revolutionary of sorts. To be fair, Russell was born in St. Louis, but his home, studio, and the high school named after him are all in Great Falls, Montana. History books often overlook the fact that only one U.S. representative spoke

against American entry into World War I on the House floor while voting against the war resolution. That the one representative was Montana's Jeanette Rankin, also the first female to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives, illustrates the aforementioned anonymity of Montana at the national level. The longest serving U.S. Senate Majority Leader in our nation's history was also a Montanan. Evidently, we breed a lot of powerful pacifists, because Mike Mansfield was a very outspoken opponent of U.S. engagement in Vietnam. Like everyone else and their dog at the time, Mansfield's anti-Vietnam efforts were in vain, but to his credit, every God-fearing Montanan knows he had more to do with passing the Great Society than LBJ did.

Montana's demographics are nothing exciting. Succinctly put, we are whiter than Miracle Whip. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, we're 90 percent white. The next largest ethnicity is American Indian, accounting for almost seven percent of the population (U.S. Census Bureau). The state's seven Indian reservations are spread pretty much everywhere but the state's interior. Anybody who has played high school basketball in Montana or Wyoming has a healthy fear of what we like to call "rez-ball." Suffice it to say that playing the teams from the reservations is generally not looked forward to.

In general, Montanans are a friendly breed. We respect and coexist harmoniously with our peers, but when provoked, we're just as stubborn as the next guy. The most divisive issues rarely involve people. In fact, it's not strange for households to be divided on a matter of wildlife management or most recently, what to do with extra money. A 2011 New York Times Opinion article by our governor, Brian Schweitzer, reported a \$433 million budget surplus for the fiscal year. Schweitzer noted that this would be proportionally equivalent to a federal surplus of \$858 billion. Few would protest having too much money, and fewer still can say it's a recurring problem, but that describes Montana's plight to a tee. Back in 2007, our legislative session temporarily adjourned for the first time in history without adopting a state budget because legislators simply could not agree on what to do with an extra billion dollars (Gouras).

Even financial discontent pales in comparison to the ever-present debate over our animals and resources. On any given day, June through September, Montana newspapers will report on wolf-hunting objections, diseased bison, declining pronghorn antelope populations, snowmobile access, or uproar over the installation of a cattle guard on some lonely stretch of U.S. highway. Our winters are thanklessly long and plagued with these same arguments every year, but add them to our 90-day legislative session every two years, and we can usually bank on a welcome break in the monotony. This owes to the fact that our state senators are notorious for being ultra-conservative and too old to walk on their own. They've also made a bizarre habit of trying to pass legislation that violates the U.S. and/or state constitutions. For the purpose of self-preservation, I suppose it's to our advantage that our current chief executive doesn't really buy into Dr. Seuss's doctrine of utter nonsense. I'll love Dr. Seuss until the day I die, but Brian Schweitzer deserves a lot of credit for how well our state has fared in some difficult years for the U.S. economy.

The greatest 24-hour temperature change in our nation's history was recorded in Loma, Montana, in 1972, when an especially warm Chinook wind moved the mercury 103 degrees,

from -54F to 49F before day's end (Horvitz et al.). Needless to say, the cold is far too frequent for complaints to be realistically tolerated. Growing up, I was always under the impression that we had two seasons: winter, and the two or three months between winters—spring and fall were just silly fantasy talk. Of course, Jeff Foxworthy's contention that we do in fact have four seasons—almost winter, winter, still winter, and road construction—is probably more accurate ("Jeff Foxworthy"). Along with spring and autumn, public trashcans are another figment of fantasies. Some clever bear always comes along and triumphs over the latest "bear-proof" waste disposal design. We like being able to say that trashcans are obsolete in Montana, because it makes us feel ahead of the game for a change.

Montana's low population may seem limiting, but the case is quite the opposite. Anyone who has ever visited or lived in the northwest United States knows there is a unique fraternity throughout the region. To illustrate this point, I discovered last semester that a friend at my university in Virginia was from northern Colorado, and told him that I was from Montana. Colorado is some 400 miles from Montana's southernmost region, but this guy still enthusiastically responded, "What?! We're practically neighbors!" Of course, Montana's immediate neighbors are the Dakotas, Idaho, Wyoming, and Canada. Excluding Canada, the familiarity between Montana and our border territories would shock most people given the physical vastness of the area. We are the largest of the five states, and I can speak from personal experience that the mutual connections are ubiquitous. I can meet a total stranger in Scobey, Montana, 531 road miles northeast of my small town of Gardiner in the state's southwest corner, and within ten minutes we could probably identify a mutual friend.

The closest professional teams are in Colorado, Minnesota, and Washington. So, but for the fools who are Canadian sports fans, we follow the Montana State Bobcats (out of Bozeman) or the University of Montana Grizzlies (from the hipster breeding-ground of Missoula). Anyone of sound mind recognizes that UM has a great deal more academic and athletic merit. It has built its reputation on its liberal arts prowess, a football team that only misses the FCS playoffs once in a generation, and a women's basketball team that wins the Big Sky Conference tournament year in and year out. Missoulians treat game days like a holy Sabbath, and they will brave any range of nasty weather to watch Griz football games. The annual gridiron matchup between MSU and UM is called "The Brawl of the Wild." It turned 111 this season and is the eleventh oldest Division I football rivalry game west of the Mississippi.

Montana's a great state, but we have a few heavy crosses to bear. Disney created a fictional character in 2006 who forever tainted the name of the Big Sky State. No number of saline baths can ever cleanse us of the shame brought on by the introduction of Hannah Montana to national television. Billy Ray Cyrus's identity-confused teenage daughter in no way reflects the values or beliefs of Montana's citizenry. Suffice it to say that Hannah Montana emasculated our state's name. Our state's name also gets used interchangeably with six or seven other landlocked states west of Minnesota when people need to complete a bad backwoods joke. Not to mention that we suffer the plight of all states that share a border with Canada, where we have to at least pretend to be friends with Canadians, and we start to adopt their dialect. I

was unaware that my own speech carried traces of America's neighbor to the north until I was mocked for pronouncing "both" as if there's an "L" in the middle of it.

As kids, we entertained ourselves by convincing people we did not have electricity or running water (I still do it with Virginians). Californians are the most gullible in my experience. We always have an easy time identifying out-of-towners because they cannot pronounce the names of the northern towns settled by French homesteaders (e.g., Havre, Gros Ventre, Wibaux, Valier), and they don't wave at passersby. Within Montana, though, I am a member of two notable minorities. I am one of the lucky few that has experienced a snow day. The downside is there must be enough snow for people to be literally snowed into their homes for authorities to even consider a "no-school" verdict. In effect, the magic and charm of having a day off is only marginal. I am also in the minority that does not have an extra freezer or an automatic rifle.

Joe Minder, a man I have known my whole life, grew up in Virginia and eventually settled in Montana. He's been in the state for almost forty years, and has never once looked back. Joe's extended response to my initial questions about the Montana stereotypes he's heard through the years perfectly encapsulates what I know and feel about my state:

When you park your car at night, you may need an extension cord. People wear shorts and a parka at the same time—I've seen you do that. The use of logging chains as wind gauges is mostly untrue except in Livingston. All joking aside, the thing I have found most unique about Montana in the thirty-five years or so I've been here, and especially about Gardiner, would be the people. You need help, someone just driving by pulls over, gives you a hand, gets back in the car and leaves. Everyone you pass on the sidewalk speaks to you. You may not know them but they always speak. Everyone you pass on the highway waves, except out-of-towners. Most of the people I know from other towns I met at high school sporting events, which is the place everyone gets together all across the state. This is why I have never left. When my wife passed away, all my children wanted me to move in with one of them. They were worried about me living alone at my age. One thing I never am here is alone.

I often find myself at a loss for words when people ask me to justify why I'm so insistent that Virginia just doesn't compare to Montana. Joe and I agree that the Commonwealth has many redeeming qualities, but as I already said, firsthand Montana experience sets a high standard. Sure, there's probably some accuracy in all of the Montana stereotypes, but irregularly harsh weather aside, what's not to like? We take pride in our resourcefulness and our immutable work ethic. We have open spaces aplenty, glaciers up north, and breathtaking scenery is always within walking distance. I've now spent almost eight full months immersed in Virginia culture, and it has only affirmed my appreciation for the great state of Montana. I now understand how revered Virginian Robert E. Lee could feel such a strong sense of duty to his state. I feel an almost daunting obligation as one of the mere million spokespersons for Montana in the world, but I'm definitely proud of where I'm from. Montana is my home, the 406, and the Last Best Place.

Works Cited

"The Butte Copper Mines." Copper Development Association Inc. Mar. 1998. Web. 29 Apr. 2012.

"Jeff Foxworthy on Montana." Rick.Stavanja.com. N.p. 30 Nov.2011. Web. 30 Nov. 2011.

Gouras, Matt. "Budget surplus Is Driving Montana Lawmakers Nuts." SeattleTimes.com. The Seattle Times Company, 10 May 2007. Web. 30 Nov. 2011.

Horvitz, Andrew H., et al. "A National Temperature Record at Loma, Montana." 12th Symposium on Meteorological Observations and Instrumentation. American Meteorological Society, 2003. Web. 30 Nov. 2011.<http://ams.confex.com/ams/annual2003/techprogram/paper_54387.htm >.

Minder, Joe. Message to the author. 30 Nov. 2011. E-mail.

U.S. Census Bureau. "State & County QuickFacts: Montana" 30 Nov. 2011. Web. 30 Nov. 2011.

Schweitzer, Brian. "Cutting Costs the Montana Way." NYTimes.com. New York Times, 18 Aug. 2011. Web. 30 Nov. 2011.