

Memories of a Yellowstone Childhood



The Roosevelt Arch at the North Entrance to Yellowstone Park in Gardiner MT

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Ron Matross

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When I look at photo albums with pictures of my ancestors, particularly of when they were young, I find myself wondering what their lives were like in their times and places. How did they spend their time? What adventures did they have? What did they eat? Where did they live? What did they love to do? I wish I knew some of those things about my parents and grandparents. I have stories about them, of course, but only as adults. I think I would understand them better and appreciate them more if I knew more about their formative years.

So, for you, my descendants and anyone else who might be interested, I have compiled some of my memories of my first 15 years. These are like a verbal photo album—snapshots of experiences small and large, silly and serious, that have stuck in my memory into my seventh decade. Together, I hope they give you a sense not only of what kind of person I was, but also what it was like to be a kid in little towns in Montana in the 1950's.

Most of my snapshots are from the 1954 to 1961, the years that I spent in Gardiner, Montana, the little town at the north entrance of Yellowstone Park. Gardiner is distinguished from other small rural towns in that it is a tourist town in a truly spectacular setting. Looking back, Gardiner in the 1950's was a wonderful place and time to be a little boy.

A Little Background

I was born on August 18, 1946 in Lander, Wyoming. I was in the vanguard of the Baby Boom, the big surge in births that occurred after men returned from fighting in World War II. My father, Val Matross, was the son of Ukrainian immigrants who were farm workers in North Dakota and eastern Montana. My mother, Marjorie Matross (Crutcher), was of Scots/Irish descent, the daughter of a railroad worker who came with his wife from the Ozarks. At the time I was born, my parents and my three-year old brother Mike were living in Ethete, Wyoming, a tiny town on the Shoshone reservation in the foothills of the Wind River mountains. My parents were teachers at the St. Michaels Episcopal mission school, which was a boarding school for Shoshone and Arapaho children.

Now, boarding schools for Native children have a terrible reputation since many endeavored to sever Native children's connections to their tribal cultures. St. Michael's wasn't one of those schools. The school, along with a mission church, was established by an Episcopal priest, John Roberts, with the endorsement of the Shoshone Chief Washikie. The mission was part of efforts by the pioneering Bishop Whipple to befriend and support Native peoples throughout the West.

And my parents weren't the kind of people who would try to take the "Indian" out of the kids. They were kind and generous to a fault, and curious and respecting of Native ways. They were accepted and respected on the reservation. I know this because some of their former students would come and visit them later in Montana. And when I became seriously ill later in my life, my parents had a Native medicine man praying on my behalf!



My Dad and Mom holding a newborn me

Billings

When I was around two or three, we moved for a while to Billings Montana, the largest city in Montana, with a population of about 35,000 at the time. Billings is in a valley, flanked on one side by the Yellowstone River and on the other by a long set of tall bluffs called the Rimrocks. It was and is a chief center of commerce for the state. In the 1950's, it was dominated by two industries: oil and cattle, with a large refinery and a large stockyard. Going around the edge of the city was to experience an olfactory assault. From one direction you got the pungent odor of the stockyards, and from the other you got the acrid smell of the refinery, and in the middle you got both!



Mike and me (on the right)

My parents went to college there, at Eastern Montana College and Rocky Mountain College. We were back because my father was studying to be a school administrator as well as a teacher. I remember just a couple of things from my toddler days there:

The first was a tumble. We were up on top of the Rimrocks above the city in a park near the airport. I apparently wandered off and fell over the edge. Given that the Rimrocks are over 600 feet high in places, that could have been disastrous. But I fell just a few feet on a sloping part. I did, however, bang my head hard on a rock and needed to have it bandaged up. I can hardly imagine the terror my parents must have felt when they realized that I had gone over the edge.

My second memory is a pleasant one: an airplane. Placed in a park near where we lived was a fighter plane, recent surplus from the war.

This was not a replica or a toy model, but the real deal. And we kids could play on it! Of course, the cockpit was closed, but we could climb and slide all over it. How cool was that? Answer: Very cool!

Lodge Grass: Back to the Rez

By the time I was around five or six we moved to the town of Lodge Grass, which was a little town on the Crow Reservation in southern Montana, about 80 miles south of Billings and about 30 miles from what was then known as the Custer Battlefield, now known as the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. Lodge Grass is situated by the Little Bighorn River and is surrounded by grassland where cattle (formerly buffalo) grazed. A few years ago, I visited there with my wife Jeanne and my granddaughter Helena, and it looked like little had changed in 70 years. It's still a town of about 400 people with dusty streets with names like "Medicine Horse Road" and "Wolf Lays Down Street"

My father was the superintendent of the school there, and my mother taught one of the elementary grades. Many of my classmates were Native.



My first-grade class. I'm 2nd from the left

I have only a few memories of my time there, a mixture of positive and negative ones.

There was a lot of wild and open country not far away, and buffalo did still roam on some of it. There was a prestigious annual event there called the "One Shot Buffalo Hunt" which challenged expert marksmen to bring down a buffalo with only a single shot. My father would go on it not to shoot, but to bring back a buffalo for the school's lunchroom. One time he also brought home a full buffalo hide with the thought of tanning it and making things out of it. My memory is that the hide stunk to high heaven, and we got rid of it. Perhaps he should have gotten some advice from one of his Native friends on how to take care of it!

Being little boys, and being in Montana, my brother and I naturally played a lot with toy guns. I don't think we played "Cowboys and Indians" because we were kind of Indians ourselves. Instead, I remember getting little Civil War caps and guns to match. Mike chose the gray confederate cap and I took the blue Yankee one (my choice anyway) and we became little Civil War re-enactors. We also had all kinds of other toy guns. I remember we had some that were made in Japan from old beer cans—You could actually see the labels for Schlitz and Pabst inside the barrels. Those were the days when American products were the high-quality ones, and Japanese products were the cheap junk.

A couple of other toys were memorable, and they were military, too. The first was a pair of little plastic soldiers we called "Hip" and "Hap". They were connected together and would "march" when placed on a sloping surface. The other was a little wooden soldier with a blue uniform that my father made for me. No doubt the specialness of that toy came from the fact that my Dad made it. Even our soundtrack was military. We had a little record player, and I remember marching around to the sound of a little yellow record of John Philip Sousa marches

The Korean War was going on, the Soviet Union had developed nuclear weapons, and the Cold War was quite real. So, like other kids around the country, we had drills where we ducked under our school desks, in case we were under attack. As if the Soviets were going to pass up New York City and Washington D.C. to bomb a tiny reservation town in southern Montana. (Ironically, when Minuteman missiles were placed in northern Montana some years later, the state did become a target.)

Lodge Grass didn't have much in the way of stores, so we did our shopping in Hardin, about 30 miles away with occasional trips to Billings some 80 miles away. These trips were not as fast as they would be now because there were no straight four-lane Interstate highways. The roads were all two-lane and twisty. The longer trips to Billings were kind of unpleasant for me, because about halfway there, my parents would inevitably have to pull over to let me throw up because I was carsick. Finally, before one trip, an idea occurred to my mother: "I wonder if we didn't smoke in the car, maybe Ron wouldn't get sick." Lo and behold, they didn't smoke on that trip and I didn't get sick!

Back in those days, nearly everybody smoked. Magazines were full of ads with movie stars, doctors, and sports stars extolling the benefits of Chesterfields or Camels in "calming" you or "opening up your lungs." To their credit, both my parents gave up smoking. My father did so while still in Lodge Grass, but my mother didn't do so until well into my adulthood. It must have been really hard to give it up at that age. From my negative conditioning in childhood, I developed an intense dislike for tobacco in any form.

For some reason, I also remember an ugly image from Hardin. In the Hardin bus station there were three restrooms: "Men", "Women", and "Indians". I don't know whether I remember that because my parents pointed it out, or whether I had some nascent sense of social justice, but the raw racism of the image burned. Racism toward Black and Hispanic people wasn't so evident, mainly because there were very few of them in Montana at the time. There were some Black members of the Air Force at Malstrom Air Base in Great Falls, and some Black porters and railroad workers in Billings, but not many elsewhere. I didn't have a Black classmate until I went to college in New York. But I do remember my mother relating that in the 1920's she saw a Ku Klux Klan cross being burned on a butte near her hometown of Laurel, which is about 15 miles from Billings.

On our trips to Billings we would usually go a few miles further down the road to Laurel to visit my maternal grandparents. Laurel had a big railroad yard, where my grandfather worked, and like Billings, a refinery. My only vision of my grandfather is of sitting on the porch of their house in a rocking chair, but I have more memories of my grandmother since she lived with us for a time in Gardiner. Laurel is at a jumping-off crossroads for going to Yellowstone Park. Continue along the river and you come to Livingston, Gardiner and the North entrance to Yellowstone. Take another road and you'll go to Red Lodge and the amazing Beartooth highway over the mountains to Cooke City and the Northeast entrance to the park. On our more recent trips to Montana in the summer, Laurel was notable because it was the home of an A & W root beer stand, which would be a welcome sight after crossing the hot plains of Eastern Montana in August.

I had a couple of traumas during my Lodge Grass days. The first came when I was trying to get on a merry-go-round with my brother and some other older kids. I was halfway on when they started it up and I got my leg hooked on it with me upside down. Once again, I took another bonk to the head that required bandages. Playground equipment didn't have the soft surfaces that are around today. They had concrete, and that's what I hit with my head. Ouch!

But for me, the bigger trauma was the "watermelon incident", which I can see and feel to this day. I absolutely loved watermelon! It was like ambrosia from the gods. One time, when we were returning from a shopping trip, we had a big striped watermelon, and I begged to be the one to carry it in. I was a little kid, and it was a big melon, and I stumbled on the way in. The watermelon splattered all over the sidewalk. I bawled. The pain came not only from the lost delicacy, but the realization that I had sought the responsibility for the treasure and then failed miserably.

On to Gardiner and Yellowstone



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DowntownGardinerMontana1999.jpg#/media/File:DowntownGardinerMontana1999.jpg>

When I was about eight, my father took a job as superintendent and principal of the school at Gardiner, Montana. My mother became the sixth-grade teacher. Gardiner is located on U.S. 89 at the north entrance to Yellowstone Park, a town of about a thousand now, but about half that when I was growing up. It straddles the Yellowstone River at the end of the Paradise Valley between Livingston and Gardiner and is surrounded by mountains, the biggest of which, Electric Peak, dominates the skyline. Gardiner is about a mile high and Electric Peak towers to almost 11,000 feet. The river goes through a gorge in Gardiner, but one with some routes down to the river. The small and swift Gardner river meets the Yellowstone at one end of town. (The name of the river is spelled different from the name of the town.)

For my memories about Gardiner, I'm not going to use a chronology, but rather themes that encompassed my formative years there.

Dangerous Things for Boys

A few years ago, a popular book came out called "The Dangerous Book for Boys." It's a guide book for a range of activities and skills that boys today aren't really learning today. I was amused at the title because I spent whole days in Gardiner doing dangerous things—riding in the back of a pickup, digging caves, shooting guns, climbing, and all kinds of things that our parents usually didn't even know about.

We were "free range" kids. In the summers, we would often take off in the morning, come back for lunch, and then come back for supper. We would be all over town, occasionally showing up to stuff at somebody's house, including our own. Our parents didn't feel the need to keep close track of us. Ours was a pretty carefree time and place.

Now I shouldn't romanticize our situation too much. I could have been hurt in all kinds of ways doing the things I did. The fact that I didn't get hurt was in many ways just good fortune. We were more likely to encounter animal predators than human predators primarily because there just weren't that many people around. And the vast majority of times when we did physically dangerous things, nothing bad ever happened. The only problem is that the consequences of a one in a thousand chance can be very bad. Fortunately, I never had anything as bad as the head knocks that I had when I was little.

A Unique Playground

Gardiner's unique location gave us unique opportunities for play, starting with the town's big landmark. The entrance to Yellowstone Park is marked by the Roosevelt Arch, a 52 ft. stone arch dedicated by President Teddy Roosevelt in 1903 and inscribed with the words "For the Benefit and Enjoyment of the People." On either side of the arch are two twelve foot walls made of the same big basalt blocks as the arch itself. The walls are about three feet thick and topped with a concrete cap. Most importantly, the blocks are uneven, leaving spots that jut out enough to make splendid hand and foot holds. So, you know what they mean: We climbed the walls. My friends and I liked to climb on the walls and hang out on top. We weren't really supposed to do that, but the park entrance station was about half mile up the road, so we didn't worry about the park rangers coming by and shooing us off. We never climbed the arch itself; we were adventurous, but not completely foolhardy!

Each summer, thousands of tourists from all over came through the arch. We liked seeing the flow of tourists coming through the arch, looking at their license plates from all over, and speculating about who the people were. Many would stop to take pictures. When they got out their cameras, we would



Helena on the Arch

jump out, and wave or make faces. So, in old scrapbooks all over the country, there might be little black-and-white pictures of me and my friends cavorting on that wall!

There was also a culvert going under the road going into the arch, and we used to like crawling into it and feeling the cars going over us. For some reason, doing this had an appeal to us 10-yr old boys. I'm not sure why. In 2017, Jeanne, Helena, and I continued our "roots" trip to Montana by

visiting Gardiner. I was sorely tempted to re-create my childhood arch adventures and go climbing with Helena, who is an excellent rock climber. But there were many signs up prohibiting it and promising surveillance, so I thought better of the idea. I didn't really want to have to explain what a 70-something guy was doing on top of the wall. Plus, going up is a lot easier than going down. We contented ourselves with Helena doing a little climbing on the inside of one of the pedestrian passages through the arch.

We lived in a couple of houses during my time in Gardiner, both rented. Teachers didn't make a lot of money then, so my parents never owned their own house until after I was grown. Most of our years were in a little house with a small yard and fence in the front, and in the back, a big dirt hill that sloped down to a vacant lot and eventually the bank of the river gorge.

That hill provided many opportunities for fun. Being dirt, it was easy to dig and shape. I would go out with my Tonka Toy grader and dump truck, a shovel, and some model airplanes. I dug and graded a great pretend airstrip for my planes, where I could pretend land and take-off. The Tonka Toys that I used were prized possessions because they were the Cadillac of toy trucks. They were well-made of metal in Minnetonka, MN, and were painted bright yellow. Every little boy in the country would ask Santa for a Tonka Toy and would be very disappointed if he got a toy by the inferior brand, Structo.

The hill was also a good place for actually flying little airplanes. We used to get little balsa wood gliders to launch. If the air currents were right, they could go a long way. Even better were rubber-band airplanes. These were balsa planes with an engine, which consisted of a plastic propeller and a long rubber band stretched from the propeller to the tail. You turned the propeller to twist the rubber band tight and then let it go. As the rubber band unwound, the propeller would send the plane skyward. No

motors, no batteries, no plastic. It's amazing how much fun we could have with such simple toys. In addition to being a launching pad for my toys, the hill was a good launching point for me, too. More about those adventures later.

Down the hill and across the vacant lot, we could continue to the edge of the river gorge. From there we could go over the edge and make our way down to the river. Maybe inspired by our culvert-crawling, some of us decided that it would be fun to dig our own secret cave into the side of the gorge a few feet below the edge. We brought shovels and worked hard for several days. We dug a tunnel about eight feet in and then hollowed out a space big enough to sit in. We brought in little candles and had a hidden clubhouse where we could plot who knows what adventures. The cave kept us entertained for several days.



The Gardner bridge From VisitGardinerMT.com. Our house was on the left of the bridge

On some days we would continue on down to the actual banks of the river. There we could skip rocks, explore the old powerhouse where the Gardner river comes in, or fish. When it comes to fishing, we were spoiled. The Yellowstone and its tributary streams are world-class trout-fishing water. We could walk out our back doors and potentially pull out beautiful brookies and rainbows. The fishing was really easy after the day each year that the giant salmon flies came to town. Salmon flies are these huge (1 inch +) flies with long iridescent wings that emerge as adults early in the summer. They would cover the bridge over the river and squish when you walked on them. We would capture a jar full of them and head for the river. The trout went nuts for them.

But, in truth, I never really got into fishing. I didn't like to eat trout and "catch and release" was not yet a thing. My best times fishing were when I went out with my Dad, who did some fishing and did occasionally eat trout. Our favorite place was in the Park, by Tower Falls, where Tower Creek runs into the Yellowstone after plunging down the beautiful falls. I remember hooking some beauties there. My father was a spin fisherman, using an open-faced Garcia spinning reel and shiny Mepps lures. He didn't fly fish, which is the type of fishing that is the trendiest and most admired in popular culture.

Of course we used the Park for all kinds of other recreation. Mammoth Hot Springs is only five miles from Gardiner, and the other attractions of the northern part of the Park were not too far in. We hiked, picnicked, and did general sightseeing. I liked the geysers of course, but my favorite spot was the Canyon area, because it was the spectacular canyon where the upper and iconic lower falls of the Yellowstone River came through. I love waterfalls, and these were my favorites. I should have a bumper sticker that says "I stop for waterfalls" because I go out of my way to see them.

Much closer by in the Park was another unique recreation venue. About halfway between Gardiner and Mammoth is Boiling River, a swimming hole with an added bonus. It's a place in the Gardner River where a hot spring flows in. We locals took rocks and built a little dam part way across the river, creating a hot pool of varying temperature, depending on how close you were to the hot spring. We would ride our bikes or ride in the back of somebody's pickup to get there and spend an afternoon. Back in my day, it was totally unmarked and only locals knew about it. Now it has a sign and parking lot, and is jammed with tourists.

A bigger place to swim was Chico Hot Springs, about 30 miles back toward Livingston. When I was growing up, it was a seedy hotel and restaurant with a big hot springs pool covered by a curved roof. We would take school trips there. We would swim around and then come out to eat hamburgers cooked on a huge greasy grill. And then we would play pinball on the pinball machines there. These were the classic old-style machines that shot little steel balls around. There were no electronics involved.

One day, the roof over the Chico pool fell in (nobody was hurt), and that was a big improvement because it opened up a spectacular view of the Absaroka mountains outside. Years later, someone bought Chico and turned it into an upscale resort with a destination restaurant where celebrity sightings can be had. In fact, the whole Paradise Valley has become a celebrity magnet. It's a gorgeous broad valley, so characteristic of Montana, flanked by the Gallatin Range of mountains on one side, and the spectacular Absaroka range on the other side, with several smaller valleys leading into the mountains. Ranches and lodges there are increasingly owned by the rich and famous, including Peter Fonda, Dennis Quaid, Jeff Bridges, and Margot Kidder.

Being in a basin, Gardiner's winters are cold and snowy, but relatively mild compared to West Yellowstone and other Yellowstone locations. Our favorite winter entertainment was sledding. That hill right behind our house was a great little sledding hill. If we hit it just right, we could slide all the way down to the edge of the river gorge, rolling off just before we went over. Our sleds were of the Flexible Flyer type, with a wooden deck resting on a pair of metal runners. (Actual Flexible Flyers were rare because that was a premium brand that we couldn't afford, so ours were cheaper ones.) You lay on your stomach on it and steered with little wooden handles that bent the runners to turn, something like the sleds used in the Olympic sport of skeleton.

The road to Mammoth and Cooke City was maintained throughout the winter, but other roads in the park were not. We would occasionally go to Mammoth on excursions to go sledding on the roads that wind around the hot springs terraces there. The steam from the hot springs froze on nearby trees, turning them into “ghost trees.” Some friends had a toboggan, and several of us could pile on it at a time. Imagine sliding around with the colorful terraces on one side and ghost trees on the other.

It is possible to go deeper into the Park, to the famous sites like Old Faithful and Canyon, but only by riding a Snow-Cat winter transport from Mammoth or taking a snowmobile from West Yellowstone. We never did so when I was a kid, but I finally took the Snow-Cat many years later when my Dad died. He died in the winter. and after his funeral in Helena MT, Jeanne and I took the Snow-Cat into Old Faithful. The trip was magical. We saw herds of buffalo, antelope and elk unbothered by crowds. Skiing around the geysers was amazing. I like to think my father was there enjoying the trip with us.

Perhaps the most awesome thing about the Yellowstone area is the realization that you are very close to the primal forces of nature. That realization was brought home to us on the night before my 13th birthday, August 17, 1959. My brother and I slept in bunk beds in a shared bedroom, with him on the top bunk, and me on the bottom. We awoke in the middle of that night to the realization that our whole bunk bed was shaking and moving in a circle. We were on the edge of an earthquake that reached 7.3 on the Richter scale, one the strongest earthquakes in the continental United States in the twentieth century. The quake was centered west and south of us about 30 miles west of the west entrance of the Park.

We went outside and in the moonlight saw landslides coming down off Electric Peak. Things came off shelves in the house, but there was relatively little damage in Gardiner. Closer to the epicenter, the quake was devastating. A massive landslide killed campers in a campground and dammed the Madison River, creating a new lake, now called Quake Lake. A total of 28 people lost their lives in the event. A few days afterwards, we drove over to look at the incredible damage. I brought my little Kodak Brownie camera and took pictures of places where the highway had split and sunk 20 feet. Now we know that much of the Park itself is inside the caldera of a giant volcano. The power of natural forces there should never be taken for granted.

School Days

Down a hill from the Arch was a large plain that was the location of an old train station and the Gardiner school. All the grades were in one building. In the front was a large dirt field where we played games and had recess. On one side of the school was a gym/auditorium with a little stage at one end.



The Gardiner School

Since my father was the head of the school, and my mother was a teacher, I was a kid who had to be on my best behavior. If I acted up, even just a bit, I would be in big trouble. Fortunately, I wasn't the type who would act up anyway, and I didn't give in to occasional dares from the other kids. I was pretty much in the mold of a stereotypical second child, fairly conventional and wanting to get along with people.

I was a good student in all my subjects, but nobody would accuse me of being brilliant at anything. (That pattern continued throughout my life. I've won a lot of second-place awards for various things. It's fitting that I wound up in Minnesota, a "pretty good" state that's always rated just below the top in everything and has a football team that has been to five Super Bowls without winning any.)

I had my mother for sixth grade. We each bent over backward to be very formal and I always addressed her as "Mrs. Matross". I do remember slipping up one time and saying something like, "Aw Mom, take it easy" that produced a wave of laughter from the other kids.



10 yr. old me

By the school we had a little playground and the big dirt field in front. Out there we had our own version of dodgeball: "Elk and Hunter." We switched off being elk and hunters. We also had fun with the railroad tracks that wound around the school field. There were no passenger trains, but there were occasional freight trains, pulled by an old steam engine. In the fall, we would sometimes put pennies on the tracks and watch the train flatten them into thin copper disks. In the winter, we would throw snowballs at the engineer as he came by, and he would return the favor by shooting a big blast of steam out the side of the engine, making us scatter. This was all in good fun, and everybody, including the engineer, laughed.

I and the other kids in town walked to school. Kids from Mammoth and another little nearby town, Jardine, came by bus. We considered the Mammoth kids kind of snooty. They were children of park rangers who lived in the park housing there. They had lived in other parts of the country, and we felt they looked down on us locals. The Jardine kids had the reputation of being hillbillies since they were way up in a pretty small and primitive place. Montana has some rather eccentric people living up in its hills.

As a little rural school, we didn't have a large curriculum. We had a woman who taught Latin, but otherwise we had no foreign languages, and we didn't have calculus or Advanced Placement courses in high school. One subject we did have, the value of which I came to appreciate later, was typing. It was a course, I suppose, to help girls become secretaries. But my father suggested I take it. I learned to touch

type on an old Underwood manual typewriter. I got fairly good and fast at typing, and it proved to be an invaluable skill in the digital age, when “keyboarding” became an important skill. No “hunt and peck” on the keyboard for me. My fingers can fly.

We had occasional school outings for picnics, parties, and field trips. One of my favorite field trips was one to the Wilcoxson ice cream and candy factory in Livingston. We not only got to see how ice cream and chocolates were made, but we got lots of free samples!

Our indoor entertainment was pretty old-fashioned. We didn’t get a TV until I was in the sixth grade. There were no cables or satellites or TV stations near us. You had to have a really big antenna to get any TV. The big breakthrough came when the town put up a big relay antenna on one of the mountains above it. Then we could actually get all of one station, KID-TV from Idaho Falls, Idaho. The programs were all in black-and-white on our little Motorola TV. I watched cartoons and westerns. My favorite cartoons were *Bugs Bunny*, *Yogi Bear*, *the Roadrunner*, and *Rocky and Bullwinkle*. They were all animated from hand-made drawings and they seem special to me now. Tales of the Old West dominated prime-time. Every night there were shows like *Gunsmoke*, *Have Gun, Will Travel*, *the Rifleman*, and my favorite, *Maverick* starring James Garner. *Maverick* was on Sunday night, and I would rush to make sure I was done with my homework in time to watch it. (Yes, I’m afraid I often put off my weekend homework until Sunday night!)

Our radio reception wasn’t that great, either. All the radio stations back then were AM and most were of limited range. But a few stations around the country were “clear channel” stations, meaning that they had no other stations in the entire country broadcasting on their frequency. At night their signals could sometimes be heard very far away. The clear channel station we listened to was KOMA, all the way from Oklahoma City, OK. We had a big old “portable” Zenith radio that looked like a suitcase, and I would go out on the back porch, pull out its long antenna and listen to KOMA.

KOMA was a revelation not only because of its strong signal, but also because it played rock and roll! The stations in Livingston and Bozeman, which we could get when we were closer to them, played only country music and the musicians like Patti Page and Frank Sinatra who were popular with adults. But KOMA played the likes of Elvis, Little Richard, Bill Haley and other rockers. Even isolated Montana pre-teens knew that this was a revolution. I still like that old rock and roll, and ironically, I now also enjoy the country music of that era by singers like Hank Williams, and Patsy Cline. KOMA was so popular in Gardiner that when we won a basketball game, we would call Oklahoma City and have them announce our win along with those of all the Oklahoma schools.

Girls weren’t particularly on my radar. I was friendly with my female classmates, but I didn’t have a crush on any of them, or hang out with them. I remember that for a while that one of our school activities was square dancing. I learned some basic moves, but those are long since forgotten. By the time I was in about the ninth grade, the school had occasional sock hops, which were painfully awkward. All the girls would be one side of the gym, and all the boys would be on the other, all wondering what to do. Whole songs would go by before some boy would get up the courage to ask a girl to dance. Then other boys would follow and ask girls to dance. This would continue until an especially slow and romantic song came up and all the boys would rush to their side again to wait it out. It wasn’t until the end of my sophomore year when we moved from Gardiner to the larger city of Helena that I started to notice girls. Then I got very interested in the “big city” girls.

Sports

In little-town Montana, we had two organized sports: baseball and basketball. The school was too small to field a football team, soccer was unheard of, and we didn't have a track. Girls didn't have any organized athletics; they could just be cheerleaders. I enjoyed both baseball and basketball, and was more avid than good at them.

We didn't have organized basketball for kids younger than high school age. But there was a "Pee Wee League" baseball team for grade school kids. I played baseball all summer long, in practices, in league games, and in our own pickup games. Our league games were with four teams from Livingston, and teams from Clyde Park and Wilsall, a couple of little towns on the other side of Livingston.

We played our home games on the big dirt field in front of the school—no grass and no fence in the outfield. The lack of a fence meant that if you hit a ball past both the infielders and the outfielders it could roll for a long way. This was especially so, along the third base line, since there was a road right next to it. A ball over the bag and past the third baseman could really roll. I was the team's third baseman, so it was my job to make sure that didn't happen. By and large, I was pretty good at it. I didn't let many balls get by me. The throw over to first from third is a long one, and I didn't have that great an arm, but I made up for it with my ability to get in front of the ball and get it out of my glove in a hurry.



Me in my uniform

Ironically, that third baseline was the scene of one of my biggest athletic disappointments. As a batter, I didn't hit many big fly balls and I seldom pulled the ball to left field. I was more of a "slap hitter", hitting line drives, usually to the opposite side of the field. But in one game, for some reason, I whacked a screaming line drive down the left field line and the ball started to roll. Probably out of shock, I must have spent a moment looking at it, and that moment cost me a home run: I got thrown out at the plate.

Wilsall and Clyde Park had dirt fields like ours, but Livingston had a real baseball field with grass, fences, and even lights, so we could play night games there. After the games, we would hit the nearby A & W root beer stand for burgers and root beers. All our "away" games really were away, since we had to drive at least an hour to play anybody.

Thanks to some local merchants, we had real uniforms, with long socks and the works. Our team was the Gardiner Braves (in those days, people weren't concerned about using Native names). When we won, we got to get a free milkshake at Callison's drugstore. Like many other drugstores in those days, it had a "soda fountain" with a long counter and stools. You could order ice cream sodas, floats, and milkshakes. It was a great feeling to sit there and drink our victory milkshakes.

ODE TO A BASEBALL GLOVE

Faithful mate, enduring friend, it seems we grow closer with each passing day. How perfect you are! Soft and supple, strong and sleek. So ideal for so unique a function. Your character shaped over time by so much oil and sweat and dirt. And by tears when my own ability left us losers. You've been my trusted companion . . . doing battle under a blazing sun . . . and drifting off into safety of slumber. I love the way you look, the way you smell, the way you feel, the way you play the game. You are my pride, my joy. I think that I will always keep you. You, my one and only, gem of the diamond, fielder of dreams, fine leather friend, glove of my life.

Tag from a Rawlings glove

We were on our own to buy our shoes and baseball gloves. I started out wearing sneakers and using a flat and cheap glove from the Coast-to-Coast hardware. I was thrilled when I got my first pair of real baseball cleats, and even more thrilled when I got my first good baseball glove. In those days, a good glove was a treasured object for little boys. The good ones were made either by Wilson or Rawlings and bore the signature of a major league star. Those of us who grew up in that era still love the smell and feel of a good glove. When we got a new glove home, we would immediately

start the breaking-in process, Breaking in a glove involved flexing it, smearing some kind of goop on it and then tying it up with a baseball inside. There was a lot of lore about what kind of goop you should use. Some used shaving cream, but many preferred some mysterious stuff called neatsfoot oil. The oil darkened the inside of the tan glove, but that was considered OK.

We used real wooden bats, because that's all there were. Even little kids in rural Montana had genuine ash Louisville Slugger bats, also signed with the name of a famous player. When the bat hit the ball well, it would make a proper "Crack!", not the pathetic little "Doink" that aluminum bats make. The bats would occasionally break, but it was worth it to know that you were holding the real deal.

Besides playing on organized team, we also had pickup games of various sorts. The yard of our first house was perfect for a game of whiffle ball home run derby. Home Run Derby was a show on TV which had major league stars compete to see who could hit the most home runs from pitches by a batting practice pitcher. If we used a whiffle ball and plastic bat, our yard was perfect for our version of the game. If you hit the ball really well, it would go over the fence in our front yard and out into the street for a home run.

We were also big fans of major league baseball. Once we got TV, we could watch not only Home Run Derby, but also the major league game of the week. There were no teams in the west at that time, so I was, for some reason, a fan of the Cleveland Indians. My favorite player was an outfielder named Rocky Colavito. Rocky was a slugger like Mickey Mantle and I cheered when he hit four home runs in one game. I was crushed when Cleveland traded him to the Detroit Tigers for an infielder, Harvey Kuenn, whom I never liked.

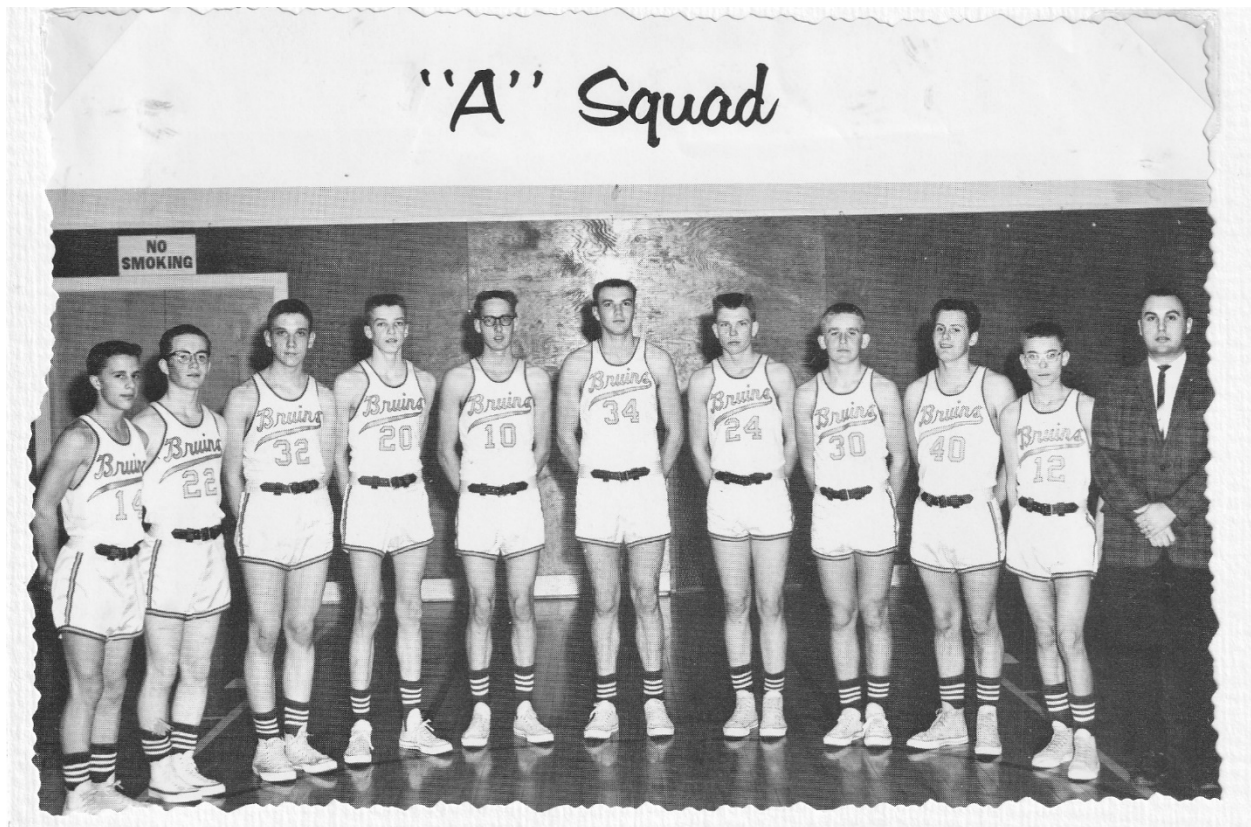
The announcers on the baseball telecast were two famous former players, PeeWee Reese who was a shortstop for the Brooklyn Dodgers and Dizzy Dean, who was a pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals. Unlike the buttoned-down announcers today, they were a hoot. You could tell they loved the game and loved their work, especially Dizzy. Dizzy was a big gregarious guy who would sometimes in the middle of an inning, say something like "Hey, PeeWee. I'm going for a hot dog. Want one?" And if the game was lopsided, he would sometimes start singing the song *Wabash Cannonball* in his southern drawl: "Listen to the rumble, listen to the roar . . .".

All the sports broadcasts back then were sponsored by shaving companies, usually Gillette, which had the slogan, "Look sharp, feel sharp, be sharp!" Not many men had beards back then, so shaving

companies did well. Another famous advertiser was Burma Shave shaving cream. Burma was famous for its highway signs. You'd be driving along and see a series of little signs a few feet apart, each with a different line. The lines would be in verse, like "A man a miss, a car a curve, he kissed the miss, and missed the curve, Burma Shave!" Or "The wolf, is shaved, so neat and trim, Red Riding Hood, is chasing him, Burma Shave!" These signs showed up even on the little roads of Montana and new ones were a treat.

Another sport we watched on TV was boxing. The Friday Night Fight was another program sponsored by Gillette. Boxing was very big back then. The Heavyweight Championship was an event almost comparable to what the Super Bowl is now. Everyone paid attention. We couldn't get the championship broadcasts TV, so I remember my Dad and me driving to the top of a big hill above town so we could tune in the car radio to the fight between the reigning champion, Floyd Patterson, an American and his Swedish challenger, Ingemar Johanssen. Ingemar said he would bring "Toonder and Lightning" and did do so, shocking the world by knocking out Patterson. In a subsequent fight, which we also listened to, Patterson regained his title by knocking out Johanssen.

In the winter, our sports attention turned to basketball. As little kids we just played in PE in the school gym, but when I was a freshman in high school, I joined the school team, on the B squad for the first year. I was relatively tall, so I played forward. I moved up to the A squad in my sophomore year, my last in Gardiner. I wasn't that good overall, but I was a fairly good rebounder. My biggest asset was sharp elbows. As I came down with the ball, my elbows would go out, fending off defenders. I didn't do it on purpose, but I remember bloodying the nose of one opponent.



I'm #32, 3d from left

Our team was the Gardiner Bruins, and our colors were blue and gold. Both the name and colors were appropriated from UCLA, but they befit a Yellowstone Park team. Our team song, however, was *On Gardiner*, adapted from *On Wisconsin* from the University of Wisconsin. Our opponents were schools in little towns north of Livingston on Highway 89—Clyde Park, Wilsall, and White Sulphur Springs, and towns north of Bozeman—Belgrade, Manhattan, Three Forks, and Townsend. The closest of these towns was Clyde Park at 75 miles away, and the farthest was Townsend at 140 miles. We had to go a minimum of 150 miles round trip and a maximum of 280 miles just to play an away game! All the gyms were small and had metal backboards, but the most memorable one was the log cabin gym at Wilsall, a tiny town of about 250 people. The gym was tiny and actually was in a building built from logs.

On the way back home after a game, we would stop to eat dinner at places that were open late. Thinking about these meals reminds me of another big athletic disappointment. Each week in practice, we had a free throw contest. The person who made the most free throws in practice got to order a steak after the game. One week I won the contest. So, of course, there I was in the game with a few seconds left and a chance to tie the game. The free-throw champ stepped up to the line, and “Thunk!”, the ball went off the rim. My steak that night didn’t taste so good. Another embarrassing moment burned into my brain forever.

Bikes

My love affair with bicycles started early. The first bike I remember was a used girl’s bike with 20 inch wheels. I used that bike essentially as a BMX bike, even though BMX hadn’t been invented yet. I would bomb down that hill behind our house and through the vacant lot, dodging rocks and pounding all the way.

I moved up to a red one-speed cruiser bike from Montgomery Ward. The bike was red because it was a boy’s bike. Back then, boys’ bikes were red and girls’ bikes were blue. We picked the bike up at the Ward’s catalog store in Livingston. Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward were the big catalog retailers. They would send out these huge catalogs as thick as a big-city phone book. The catalogs had nearly everything you could want from baby clothes to power tools. They were the Amazon of the day and were a boon to little rural towns like ours. You picked up big items at a catalog store, which saved shipping costs if it was in a railroad town like Livingston.

I rode that red bike all over. In particular, I would ride it the five miles up to Mammoth. That road is uphill for much of the way, but I was able to pedal until I reached the switchbacks on the last big hill into Mammoth. I would hang around at Mammoth for a while, getting a coke and watching tourists and elk. And then, of course, I would head back down. Whee! No helmet, no front brake (just a rear coaster brake), and no fear. When I go back to the area now, I’m pretty impressed with my 10 or 12 year-old self. That ride from Gardiner to Mammoth is not easy. My old legs would be tested even with my multi-gear titanium racing bike.



Black Phantom Replica

replica of a Phantom at stores like Target.

I also acquired bike lust pretty early. I enhanced my bike as best I could; I put on red valve caps in the shape of little crowns that I got from the Standard Oil gas station. But the object of my dreams was the iconic Schwinn Black Phantom. At that time Schwinn was a high-end brand that we couldn't afford, even if we found a dealer who sold them (nowhere near us). They were big cruiser bikes, glossy black, with red trim and bright chrome parts all over, including a big spring on the fork. Multi-gear "English Racers" hadn't made much of an impact then, so half the kids in America wanted a Black Phantom. Sadly, Schwinn is now a low-end discount store brand, and you can buy a cheap

Boy Scientist

I liked science and technology a lot as a kid. My favorite books were the Tom Swift Jr. stories. Tom Swift Jr was a teen-ager who built fantastic devices using cutting-edge technology. There was an older series of books about Tom Swift Sr. in the 1930's, so Tom Swift Jr. was his son. The books were cranked out every couple of months or so by the same people who did the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew mysteries, which were also popular back then. Titles included "*Tom Swift and his Space Solartron*" and "*Tom Swift and his Triphibian Atomicar.*" It was a big treat for me to go to the bookstore in Livingston and pick up the latest Tom Swift book.

Like the rest of the world, I really got interested in space after the launch of Sputnik, the first satellite in space in 1957. That little Russian satellite galvanized the world, and ushered in the era of the space exploration. I was so taken with the idea of space that I decided to build my own rocket. I recruited a friend, and we started assembling parts for the small rocket. At that time, there was no Internet, no rocket kits, no rocket clubs, and no plans for rockets. We were entirely on our own. So we put together parts that would resemble a rocket—a brass tube for the body, and a nose cone and fins that we made out of wood. We found a mechanic at local gas stations to machine us a nozzle for the end of the rocket. Our propellant was gunpowder that we took from shotgun shells. We planned to ignite the rocket using a charge from wires connected to a large battery.

Launch day came, and we proceeded out to the launch site on the edge of town, "Gardiner International Airport", which consisted of a single dirt runway and a little hangar. We set up the rocket next to a little rise, behind which we could hide in case it exploded. We connected the wires and "Poof", Nothing happened. My friend's little brother had accidentally pulled out the wires and messed them up. The wind was coming up and we needed to repair the setup, so we went home. We never went back. I'm not sure that the wires would have worked anyway. We probably needed to light an actual fuse to get it to go. We moved on to other things.

I had more success with my science kit and my crowning achievement, a homemade cloud chamber. The science kit came from the Edmund Scientific Company in New Jersey. The magazines *Popular Mechanics* and *Popular Science*, were as their names suggest, quite popular then. Most issues had a dense full-page black and white ad, from the Edmund Scientific Company, advertising kits for putting together telescopes and all kinds of electrical and mechanical devices. What I wanted and eventually got, was their science kit, for making many different things. I made all kinds of electrical circuits that would set run bells, lights and gauges.

But the best thing in the kit were the parts for a cloud chamber. A cloud chamber is a device for tracing the paths of atomic particles. It creates a supersaturated cloud of alcohol vapor that shows the tracks of particles passing through it from the atmosphere. I built it and took it to school to show it in class, and amazingly, it worked! You could see little tracks through the cloud left by particles as they passed through it. I was thrilled.

The reason why the cloud chamber was so cool was that there was a general fascination with atomic energy back then. The first atomic bomb had been dropped just over 10 years earlier, and there was written about the promise of atomic energy. Nobody could see this whole new world of atoms and subatomic particles, so to see some traces of that world was exciting. Space and atoms were going to be big, and everybody knew it.

Animals

Large mammals were a common site around Gardiner. A major elk migration route was just a few miles north of town. Elk, deer and buffalo would sometimes make it into town, and bears weren't that unusual. The national park boundary ran right near school, and I swear the animals could read the signs. A big herd of pronghorns was often right inside the boundary.

Hunting was big in the fall. Deer and especially elk hunters would fill the down. My Dad wasn't hunting at that time, but we often had elk and deer steaks given to us by local hunters. And we ate plenty of game meat in our school lunches. You had to be careful hiking around in the hills during hunting season. I remember one time seeing bullet holes in the bus that went up to Jardine.

Every kid in junior high took hunter safety training, and everybody had a gun or access to one. My brother had a .22 caliber rifle that I would sometimes use. I wasn't interested in shooting animals, so I would go out and plink bottles and cans. I thought guns were sort of cool, but Mike was much more interested in them than I was.

One evening we heard a noise on the back porch and looked out to find the porch occupied by a big black bear. Black bears were not as scary as grizzlies, but they still needed to be taken very seriously. We called a park ranger who came and shot the bear with a tranquilizer dart. He brought some friends, because they had to move the bear off the porch and into a truck to be taken into the park.

We had some pets. Back in Lodge Grass we had had a big yellow dog, but in Gardiner we just had cats. I wasn't particularly attached to any pet. That situation changed when one day, my mother brought home from school, a quivering little bunny in a basket. He was found hiding near the school. We speculated that he had been an Easter purchase by some tourists, who let him out after their kid tired of it. He became my pet. He (or she, not sure) was white with black ears, and black and brown splotches of

fur, including around the eyes. The only name we had for it was “Bun-rabbit”. I loved that bunny. His fur was exquisitely soft and his little pink nose was very cute.

We built a cage for the bunny, and he stayed under a table in the dining room. (I’m amazed now that my parents permitted that). I would take him out and hold him and play with him. As he grew bigger and stronger, we let him roam the house for extended periods of time. He got quite comfortable moving around the house. I remember one time, we had a bowl of peaches on a coffee table in front of the couch. The bunny loped in and calmly put his paws on the table and took a big bite out a peach. Of course, I gave him more, perhaps as a reward for his chutzpah. We also had a big orange cat who wasn’t terribly appreciative of the rabbit and would occasionally swat at it. One time, when the bunny had grown big, the cat came in to harass him as usual. But this time, the bunny rose up on his big back paws and came down on the cat with his two front paws. The cat left him alone after that.

The bunny came with us when we moved to a larger house across the river. There his hutch was down in the basement, and it was there that tragedy struck. My parents had brought home from the school lunchroom some leaves that had been peeled from the outside of heads of iceberg lettuce before they were served. I fed them to the bunny in the evening, and when I went to see him in the morning he was dead. (It makes me wonder about our school lunches!). I took him out to airport to bury him. The dirt was there was soft and easy to dig. I was quite sad and wasn’t interested in getting another pet.

Food

When I think about the food we ate back then, the first thing that comes to mind is candy (I was a little boy, after all.) We had some interesting candies that generally aren’t made now, or were specific to the region. One of the regional candies was the “Idaho Spud”, which was chocolate-covered chocolate marshmallow in the shape of a potato. Another was the “7-Up Bar,” which was seven chocolates like you would get in a box of chocolates, but joined together in one bar. I enjoyed five of the chocolates, but wasn’t thrilled about the brazil nut, and didn’t like the jelly one at all. One of my favorites was the “Big Hunk”, which was about eight inches of chewy vanilla nougat with nuts in it. It was a lot of candy. A smaller nougat candy bar was the “Bit o’ Honey”, which was little pieces of soft honey-flavored nougat on a sheet of waxed paper. On the lighter side were Necco Wafers, which were a roll of thin, round sugar wafers in various fruit and mint flavors. Then there were the penny candies, which were sold at the town drugstore. I liked the little licorice cowboy hats and cowboys.

For holidays, the drugstore would sell larger figures (Santa Claus, Easter Bunny) made out of chocolate-covered marshmallow. After the holiday, the candy would be discounted. Having a little entrepreneurial streak, I would walk up to the store during the school lunch hour, buy some and then sell them to my classmates for a profit. At Christmas, we had lots of homemade candy. My mother would make fudge and divinity, which is a white nougat made from egg whites, sugar, and Karo corn syrup. Karo syrup was also the key to my one of my other holiday favorites, popcorn balls, which were sticky but tasty.

We had our share of sugary drinks. I drank plenty of pop (not “soda”) and it was all made with sugar; there was no diet cola then. My favorites were cola and cream soda. Coke and Pepsi had a strong competitor in Royal Crown Cola, which I liked. Pop mostly came in small glass bottles then. The best were the Coke bottles, because they had molded on the bottom of them the name and location of the bottling plant where they were first used. We would get bottles from Salt Lake City, Chicago, and all

over. I'm not sure how they made it to the Montana bottling plant. We bought the pop from interesting machines. There were the upright ones, where you put in your nickel, opened a door, and pulled out a bottle. But my favorite were old-fashioned chest machines that were filled with ice water and had the bottles arranged along horizontal slots. You put in your money and then moved your bottle along the slots through the water to where you could pull it out.

When I travel to other countries or other regions of the country, I always like to look at and try the candy bars that are sold there. I think you can learn a lot about the culture of an area from the junk food that people like there. I remember buying a candy bar in Ireland that was marketed for men only, not for girls. In the deep south, Goo Goo Cluster candy bars are a mainstay. In Poland, we saw a convenience store advertising "Tex-Mex kielbasa." Potato chips are an especially good way to judge an area's tastes. Go into a supermarket and look at the potato chip flavors. In Canada you can find poutine-flavored chips, in Japan seaweed, in England roast beef, and in the mid-Atlantic U.S., crab-flavored chips.

For main dishes, we ate a lot of meat, beef and sometimes elk and deer. It was Montana, after all. No sushi or vegetarian meals back then. My father didn't hunt, but we often got elk and deer steaks from other people. My mother did the cooking back then. I don't remember much in the way of dishes that she made, except macaroni ones that I liked—mac and cheese, and mac with hamburger and tomato sauce. When he had to, my father cooked but his repertoire was pretty much limited to hamburgers and fried potatoes which were greasy but good).

For a few years, my maternal grandmother came and lived with us, and she did the cooking. She brought her southern background to her cooking, so our cuisine expanded to include fried chicken, biscuits, and other quite tasty southern dishes. But the cooking I remember her most for was her oatmeal cookies. They were world-class, top-shelf, absolutely the best oatmeal cookies I have ever tasted. They were thin, golden, and chewy. I don't know what her secret was, but I think the recipe involved generous quantities of molasses and butter.

My grandmother lived in a little trailer behind our first house. Sometimes she would invite me out to have tea with her in her trailer. I don't know why she did so, or what we talked about, but I do remember the time was pleasant. Later she went to Nebraska to live with her other daughter there.

There was just one small grocery store in Gardiner, so we would make a weekly trip to the Safeway in Livingston to do most of our shopping. We would often go out to lunch on those trips, usually to the restaurant in the train depot. The depot restaurant was pretty good and featured "chicken fried steak", which was a thin steak breaded and fried like fried chicken. The restaurant also featured bean soup, but I usually ate a hamburger. Sometimes we would have reason to go on over the pass from Livingston to Bozeman. There, our go-to restaurant was the "Colonel's." Its specialty was "chicken in a basket" which was fried chicken and French fries served in a plastic basket. What the basket added I don't know, but we thought it was special. The *Colonel's* had a big juke box. You selected songs on a device at your table, paid your nickel, and the big colorful machine would select the right 45 disc and play it.

Bozeman also had a nice bakery that was a must visit when we were in town. I remember getting big sugar cookies and delicious maple sticks, which were doughnut-dough sticks with maple frosting on them. With Montana State University there (the "ag" school in Montana) and ranches all around it,

Bozeman was a fairly sleepy farm/ranch town, totally unlike the sprawling, trendy “Boz-Angeles” that it has now become.

Given that my diet had ample amounts of sugar, red meat, and grease, you might ask how healthy it was. The answer is probably not very. But it is interesting that we saw very few obese people in Montana at the time. I think the secret is that portions were simply smaller. When we had our cokes, we got them from a 6.5 ounce bottle, rather than the 20 ounce bottles sold today. Restaurant meals and other servings were similarly smaller. Hershey bars, for instance, were thinner than today. In fact, Hershey used to keep the length and width of the bar the same, but varied the thickness. When the price of chocolate was high, Hershey bars would be about the thickness of razor blade!

All that sugar was definitely not good for our teeth. I had a lot of cavities and fillings as a kid. There was no fluoride in the water to help prevent cavities. The idea was talked about, but many people were skeptical of it. The crazy right-wing group of the time, the John Birch Society, proclaimed that fluoride in the water was a Communist plot to control our minds. With no internet, the John Birch Society got its ideas out in pamphlets that you could find in storefront John Birch “reading rooms.” (One time when I was in college, I had a layover in Billings, when I was returning home in the summer. I amused myself by going down to the John Birch Reading Room and making up stories about crazy plots that I ran into in college in New York. The more outlandish my story, the more they lapped it up!)

Travel and Wanderlust

I traveled a lot as a kid, but not to many places. That paradox is explained by the fact that we had to go to the Livingston or Bozeman area each week to get things we needed or get things done. But we seldom went to other places. The two biggest trips I took were out to Oregon to visit my father’s sister and her family, and to Nebraska to visit my mother’s sister and family. The trip to Oregon was scenic. We would go through the Craters of the Moon National Monument and along the Columbia River Valley to a farm near Salem, where we would visit my Aunt Rose, my paternal grandmother, and several cousins.

The trip to Nebraska was different. I believe we took my grandmother there to live with my Aunt Betty and her family, also on a farm. I remember crossing the high Big Horn mountains in Wyoming in a fog, which made for some anxious moments. I also remember swimming at a big hot springs pool in Thermopolis, Wyoming. As for Nebraska itself, I don’t remember anything.

More frequent were our trips to visit my father’s brother, my Uncle Phil and his wife Carol, across the state in Miles City MT, also located on the Yellowstone River, but 300 miles to the east out on the plains. I loved visiting my Uncle Phil. He was an industrial arts (aka “shop”) teacher at the local school. He had a talent for just about any kind of craftwork you could think of. He and Carol had no children, and she was a fastidious housekeeper (I remember a white carpet!). Which meant that Phil spent a lot of time in the garage. And what a garage it was. It had a stove, chairs, and equipment for all kinds of things—woodworking, metal working, rock cutting, leather tooling, calligraphy and more. There were shelves of old *Popular Mechanics* and *Popular Science* magazines. It was a garden of delights for a little boy. I would hang out with him and watch him do all the crafts and then try some myself, but I wasn’t there long enough to really learn them.

One summer, after my junior year in high school at Helena, Phil and I took a float trip down the Yellowstone nearby, stopping at islands and beaches to look for agates. We'd camp out and eat suppers of boiled eggs and Vienna sausages. On my college application essays, I would describe this trip as a "geological expedition."

After my parents quit smoking in the car, I didn't mind car trips. In fact, I rather liked cars. I liked them not only for their utility, but also as design objects. (If I had had any talent for it, I would have loved to be an industrial designer.) Unlike the look-alike boxes of today, cars in the 1950's and 60's sought to look distinct from other brands. It was an optimistic time in the country, and car design was an exuberant reflection of that optimism. Cars were big, curvy, and swoopy, and each had their own design cues. Styling changed every year, and the introduction of the new year's cars in the fall was a big deal. Beforehand there was always great speculation about what would be changed.

I remember the day in the summer of 1956 when I saw some cars that were absolutely unlike any I had ever seen before. They were huge and low with swept-back windshields and giant tailfins. About four of them came to Gardiner and parked for a while at a gas station. When I saw them, I immediately rushed home and got my camera to take pictures. My camera was an inexpensive Kodak Brownie using 620 film, but it was a double lens reflex design, just like the expensive Rolleiflex cameras that professional photographers often used. I burned up a roll of film (8 or 12 pictures) on those cars. It turned out they were slightly disguised versions of the new 1957 cars from Chrysler Corp, in the area for high-altitude testing. I was thrilled at the sneak preview!



My View Master and camera

Anything that came from the big world outside of Montana interested me. I always wanted to know what was on the other side of the mountain, and I yearned to see new and different places. One thing that fed my fantasies about exotic places was my View-Master. The View-Master is a little hand-held viewer for looking at pictures in 3-D. You bought little round reels with 14 transparent color pictures on them that made up seven stereoscopic images when you looked at them in the viewer. A few years ago, I found my old viewer and some of my old reels in my parents' garage, along with my old camera. My reels encompassed lots of far-away places, including Havana, California, Miami, and more. No doubt about it, I wanted to see the world. (I also had story reels, like the history of the Civil War and the adventures of Rin-Tin-Tin, about an heroic dog who worked for the army in the old west).

My travel imagination was also stoked by the sight of big passenger trains. In those days, Montana was crossed by three competing rail lines, each with their own fast premier train. Each of these trains traveled between Chicago and Seattle. The Great Northern line had the *Empire Builder*, which went along the Northern part of the state. The Milwaukee Road had the *Olympian Hiawatha*, which through the central part of the state. The one that I knew best was the Northern Pacific's *North Coast Limited*, which traversed the southern part of the state through Billings, Livingston, and Bozeman. It was a huge green streamlined diesel-powered beauty, with sleeping cars, an elegant dining car, and "vista-dome" cars which had a big plastic bubble on top, where passengers

could sit and get a panoramic view. Sometimes we would be eating lunch at the Livingston Depot restaurant when the eastbound North Coast Limited came in. You could tell by the speed and sound of its horn that it was the top train. It would pull in and porters would jump out to escort people on and off. And it would be on its way before you knew it; it was an express and had no time to linger.

I was in awe of that mighty train and dreamed of going away on it. I would look up at the people in the vista-dome and the people eating in the dining car, and I wanted to join them going to the big cities in the east. As a country kid, I was fascinated by the idea of big cities. At Christmas, my favorite carol was "Silver Bells." I imagined what it would be like to see "city sidewalks, busy sidewalks, dressed in holiday style."

And in just a few short years, I would indeed board the mighty North Coast Limited headed east for college. I stood waiting for the train at Logan Junction, MT, underneath a hill that Natives had used as a buffalo jump. Logan Junction was a "whistle stop" meaning we had to request it stop for me. I was there because the junction was the closest the train came to Helena, where my family now lived. I'm not sure the train actually came to a full stop, when I threw my duffel bag on and jumped on. Having never been east of Nebraska, I went to Chicago, where I switched trains for my final destination of Columbia University in New York City.

I never went back to Montana to live. During college, I came back to work in the summers, and when I had a family, we would visit my parents in Helena every year. I went on to a new life and new adventures. I have indulged my wanderlust by visiting many countries around the world, as well as every state in the U.S. When we left Gardiner after my sophomore year in high school, I was getting restive and was ready to leave. The larger town of Helena proved to be a better launching point for me. But I cherish my memories of growing up on the edge of Yellowstone Park. It was a fun place for a little boy at that time to grow up!