

May, 2008

Edited by Martha Crawley

Memo from Martha:

This is an unusually long newsletter (don't I always say that? But this time it really is!), owing to several things: The fascinating history article Bill Hoolan found about our area; the old photographs Larry Oltheim found and generously shared with us, actual pictures of some of the main characters taken right on our ranch nearly a hundred years ago; and Mike Wells' and Gene Welch's always good contributions. We hope the quality and interest will make up for the somewhat excessive quantity!

Thought for the day:

I don't know who is responsible for the following, but it was sent by a friend on email, and contains words to live by:

"Live your life in such a way that when your feet hit the floor in the morning, Satan shudders & says...'Oh no....she's awake!!'"

Ranch Recipes

Missourians Never Had It So Good Linguini

12 ounces dry linguine or other pasta
4 Tbs butter
2 large cloves garlic (pressed)
1 cup chopped onion
1 cup sliced mushrooms
1 cup diced tomatoes
4 Tbs (or more) ripe olives or kalamata olives, sliced
1 cup dry white wine
2 Tbs fresh lemon juice
12 ounces marinated artichoke hearts, drained and sliced
2 ripe avocados, pitted, peeled and sliced
freshly grated parmesan

Cook pasta until tender to bite (about 3 minutes), drain.

Melt butter in large frying pan over medium heat; add garlic, onion, and mushrooms, stir occasionally until onion is limp, about 10 minutes. Stir in tomato, olives, wine, lemon juice, and artichoke hearts. Bring to boil on high heat; cook, uncovered until reduced by about 1/3, add pasta and mix with two forks until well coated. Pour onto warm platter and top with avocado. Pass cheese. Serves 4-6.

Fishing With Mike Wells

Great Expectations

The swirling wind outside my window creates eddies making the duck down sized snow flakes dance madly back toward the sky. Nearly May and Mother Nature hasn't relinquished her wet grip!

Arranging for this trip's snowmobile I caught up with the fellow in West Yellowstone that I rent from on his cell phone while he was in Minnesota getting his snow removal equipment repaired. Seems this winter put the big hurt on his fleet. When I reflect on how

diligently and knowledgeably he personally maintains his snowmobiles while/after others abuse them, I can't comprehend how one season's wear and tear on his snow removal equipment could cause him to seek help from the manufacturers. Must have been quite a reality adjustment for a guy who thinks he can fix anything and usually does. In the course of our conversation he let on that the real locals (he doesn't qualify, only having lived here half his fifty six years) don't remember this much snow since the mid 60's. The drift that was my driveway & was stacked up seven feet high in February has shrunk to four to five feet now. It's still a bit unsettling to stand looking out the kitchen window and be eye level with the skis and track of the snowmobile!

The high country is packed so deep and thick that we might be seeing snow until next winter! I suppose it's only reasonable to assume that the snow will eventually melt. Although, with this past winter trashing any semblance of recently established weather patterns, it's a crapshoot to estimate when, how much and how fast it will happen.

The abundance of moisture bodes well for the Madison River & the Madison Valley on many fronts.

There should be sufficient runoff to fill Hebgen Lake, which should lead to adequate stream flows all season. Being a tail-water fishery with controlled flows, the Madison rarely experiences the scouring and cleansing of the streambed like a natural, undammed river does. Hopefully the snowmelt happens in such a way as to be able to provide a good flushing of the river, which would be beneficial for the fish & their food supply. Flushing the river typically relocates rocks, stumps, logs & other cover, which in turn contributes to a more dynamic & healthy fish population. Scouring the streambed removes accumulated sediment, which provides better propagation conditions for the bugs the fish eat.

It appears that even if the Madison Valley receives below average rainfall during the coming spring & summer months there should be sufficient accumulated moisture to significantly reduce possible wildfires. Hopefully this year we can return to the 'good old summertime' instead of 'fire season'! All this water will also go a long way toward replenishing groundwater supplies in the springs, ponds, lakes & aquifers that we have been drawing down during the recent drought years.

All in all, it's shaping up to be a very good year on the Madison River & in the Madison Valley. I'm looking forward to this fishing season with excitement & 'Great Expectations'. See you on the water!

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Hoolan's Report

Greetings everyone,

I wanted to share this article, researched by Deb Townshend, a long time summer resident in the upper valley. As you see the historical buildings and farm equipment on the ranch from a long ago time, it will help paint a picture of the "hardy" group that came before us.

As you will read, Alvin Womack, started it all. He homesteaded the property on the big bend of the river and built his home where Dick and Addie Miller's log home is located today. The Womack house foundation can still be seen in the sage brush.

A few years after Alvin built the home, it was rented to the Hestor family and their 3 children.

The youngest, Loren, was about 6 years old. Sandra and I were able to track him down in a nursing home approximately 10 years ago, at the ripe old age of 90 plus. We would sit at his bedside and he would tell us stories about his young life on the ranch. One of my favorites was, " after he got his chores done, his mother would let him go down to the river and sit around the campfire with the Indian kids. He would sometimes trade bread for moccasins and gloves". The Indians in those days would leave the reservation in the summer, and one of their favorite places to camp and fish was on the big bend.

On your walks around your property, look closely if any of the flat rocks are laid out in a square design, about ground level, these may have been the footings of the settlers homes.

I have found several over the years.

Many thanks to Deb for letting us share her story about the pioneers of our ranch,
Best Regards, Bill

P.S. On another note, many of you have been calling to see if you can get to your property.

It's now May 12 and about 1/2 the ranch roads are still closed due to the snow. The potential of future snow plowing will be discussed in detail at our annual meeting. Hope to see all of you there.

The Hardy Homesteaders of Missouri Flats

Janet McAtee and Deb Townshend (Research)

Deb Townshend (Manuscript)

It was the summer of 1909 that Alvin Womack heard the news from a friendly forest ranger at Lyon: The land that Al and his family had been "squatting" on in the upper Madison Valley was open for homesteading. Parts of Townships 11 and 12 South, Range 2 East, in the Madison (Beaverhead) National Forest had been reclassified as having "agricultural potential" and had been turned back for entry under the Homestead Laws.

Al, formerly from Faigrove, Missouri, wasn't a newcomer to the area, having lived in the boom-town of Pony since 1895. He had owned a bar there, married a local girl, Eva Young, and built a substantial house, mortgaged by the bank. When business slowed down because of mines closing, Al lost everything. So he was ready to accept the government's offer of free land---160 acres to any person who would settle down and farm for three years.

The open bench land with its fringe of forest stretched for several miles between the Madison River and Cliff and Wade Lakes. Sleek cattle from the well-established ranches nearby grazed contentedly on the unfenced grassy flats. The fine powdery soil would produce good crops when watered, Al speculated. The tall, handsome would-be farmer decided to do two things: First, pick a likely homestead on the public domain and then write to all his folks back in Missouri to come out and make the most of this bonanza. Enterprising Al had in mind they could all work to improve their plots and sell them for a profit.

And so the Womack clan came. There was brother Wes and his wife, Jane; sister Lillie and her husband, Barney Mathis; half-brothers Harv Dennis and wife, Stella; Charlie

Dennis and wife, Effie; Vace Dennis and wife, Mae; Grandma Dennis (Al's mother who had remarried); nephew Emmett Womack; cousins Jake Womack and wife, Lula; Jerry Womack and wife, Winifred, with her mother, Mrs. Baker and sons Harold and John; and to round out the healthy migration, a large assortment of offspring.

After the tedious journey from Missouri to Chicago, then to Pony on the Northern Pacific Railroad, the families stayed there awhile before heading out for their "promised lands." Of course, they didn't all arrive at the same time, but within the next couple of years the cabins of Al's kinfolk dotted the sage-covered benches and hillsides like raisins on a cake. For himself, Al chose a site near the big bend in the river and transferred Eva and their little daughter, Vernice, to the new home.

"Missouri Flats," the natives called the settlement, and this was set down on the maps.

The Missourians weren't the only ones to get wind of the new homesteading lands. Jess Conners of Sheridan and his young bride, Johanna, and brother Jack and wife Madge also heard of the golden opportunity in 1911 from ranger Sterling Finley at Lyon Post Office, as did bachelor Ferd Schoenek and his brother, Paul and Paul's wife, Georgy (Higbee), arrivals from Wisconsin.

Team-drawn wagons crammed with families and household goods stirred up the dust on the long, rough road from Ennis to the Flats that hot July of 1912. Autumn Neely, who was cooking for Reinhold Hippe at his Wolf Creek ranch, wondered at so many loaded vehicles passing on the highway and not coming back. When she and her husband, Vern, learned of the land opened for homesteading, they borrowed Mr. Hippe's buckboard and drove up to appraise the situation.

A clear, cold stream rushed through a quarter of the 160 acres Al Womack had staked out for them for \$25. "Us from Missouri, two green kids," Mrs. Neely recalled ruefully, "We figured water there in August was good. You could depend on it, 'cause that's the way it was in Missouri."

The young couple had no more than set up their tent poles when the water ceased flowing. It turned out to be a high-water irrigation ditch controlled by the cow men. Apparently, the ranchers who had been using the National Forest Grazing lands for a long time weren't overjoyed with the infestation of farmers and their barbed wire fences.

Nevertheless, optimistic Mid-Westerners continued to flock to the free land during the 'teens and 'twenties. At the peak of settlement, if a person stood on a height at night he could count the pinpricks of lamplight from about fifty cabins.

Why did these 20th Century pioneers come to this isolated corner of Montana?

As one old-timer put it: "To get away from Missouri! The soil there was wore out before we was born." Others saw it as a chance to improve their lot in life by getting something for nothing. 160 acres looked like a mighty big piece of property to them, and they figured this might be the last land open to homesteading.

Still others, like bachelors Andy Anderson, Shorty Droblich, Pete Rahn, Jimmie Skilbeck and Nelson Hayes, drifted into the territory seeking work. Hebgen Dam was being constructed between 1909-1915 and some got jobs there. "That dam was a lifesaver for the poor old homesteaders," recalled Vernice Womack Loftin. About 1915 operations began at the asbestos mine deep in Sheep Mountain canyon, and many of the arrivals were employed there.

The Frank Huggins, William DeWinner, Dick Gillespie, Clyde Carter and Fred Young families (the latter two were Al Womack's in-laws) swelled the growing number of homesteaders. It would be impossible to list the names of all the people who lived at one time or another in the area, but they all shared in the struggle to make a go of it.

When one former resident was asked what they thought to do with the homesteads, she exclaimed, "Think! We didn't think. We just lived there and tried to get by." Getting by turned out to be a pack of hardships in a hostile country – not the "land of milk and honey" dreamed of.

The hardy but frustrated homesteaders didn't stand a gopher's chance of developing wealth on their land. In the beginning and to the very end, the biggest obstacle was the perennial lack of water.

The daily chore of bringing water up from the river or the lakes was something they hadn't reckoned on. But food had to be cooked, clothes washed, livestock attended to and the kitchen garden wetted down. The proverbial wash-tub in the middle of the cabin floor on Saturday night had to make do for bathing.

Lucky – or foresighted – was the man who filed on land that contained a dependable spring, as the Schoeneks did. Al Womack ran a ditch from Keller Springs (later the post office site) down through his place and was able to grow thriving gardens. Vernice remembers that "they all laughed at our rock pile near the river, but we didn't have to haul water." Shorty Drobnich laboriously dug a well.

Another unconquerable enemy was the prolonged bitter winter. Temperatures would often drop to 40 degrees below. Icy winds swept across the exposed flats, billowing up snowdrifts so a person could hardly stagger from cabin to barn. Frostbite was a real danger unless one bundled up carefully. During a particularly long winter, the hay ran out for some people, and they even had to take straw out of the hens' nests for the starving cattle.

Transportation was on foot, horseback or skis. The long skis made of pine were for getting around rather than for pleasure. Gladice Thompson remembers how her Dad (Jerry Womack) used to make the skis by putting wood in water in big tubs on the stove. "He'd take a rope and tie them down while the water was softening the lumber. When it was soft enough, he'd bend the ends up. Next he'd put leather harnesses on so we could slip our feet in. Then off we'd go!"

Photos contributed by Larry Oltheim. Below, this page, Cliff Lake Homestead, Jerry Womack camp; next page, building of Cliff Lake Schoolhouse, Jerry Womack





Those frigid winters spent on the flats are vivid memories of octogenarian Johanna Schoenek (widow of both Jess Connors and Ferd Schoenek): “I was froze to my hips every day. I carried water, dug snow and carried hay, fed cattle and chopped ice. If I had never seen that place, I wouldn’t be off my feet now!”

The first signs of spring were eagerly awaited. “One way of telling,” Mrs. Schoenek recollected, “was to watch the cars (at a later period) go down the road to the Hole-in-the-Rock draw, where the snow was the heaviest. If they didn’t come back, we knew we could get out too, but sometimes that wouldn’t be until June.”

To paint a picture of perpetual misery suffered by the homesteaders because of back-breaking labor and cruel weather would not do justice to their resiliency and spirit of cooperation.

Mutual aid was perhaps the saving grace of the little community. "Helping each other was a Missouri style, be you old or young, big or small," commented Mrs. Neely. When birth, sickness or death troubled a family, the neighbors came to help. Doctors in Ennis were too far away to fetch, so Grandma Dennis and Autumn Neely were often called upon to act as mid-wives, nurses and morticians.

Neighborliness also meant giving a fella a hand with the building of his cabin and barn. The sod-roofed cabins were small with one or two rooms and sometimes a loft. Usually they were within hollering distance of each other.

Two other things besides the willingness to oblige a neighbor drew the scattered community together – the Cliff Lake School and Post Office. With both of them located at Nels Haldorsen's place, it was natural for people to gravitate there. Serious business and sociability were combined at thrashing time when whole families assembled at Haldorsen's to use his thrasher. The women seldom traveled far from "dishrag and broom," so they welcomed the chance to visit.

There were other good times, too – picnicking and fishing up the West Fork and Madison canyons, baseball games, home talent plays, boating and riding. Cut off from ready-made amusements, the people organized their own fun. The frequent dances held in the schoolhouse topped the list. Couples would waltz and two-step across the floor while Winnie Womack played the piano and Frank Huggins and his son Arde sawed away at their fiddles.

But as one harsh year followed another, the dances became less frequent. Families gave up and pulled out of the country. "Too darned cold"..."Can't get a good crop"..."no water" were the constant complaints. Some put the blame squarely on the government saying it shouldn't have opened the land in the first place. The people were "all starved out," according to one observer. "Lots of evenings all they had to eat was lard soup 'n spuds." Yet Gladice Thompson says she never remembers going hungry. "if you ran out of some item, you could always borrow it from a neighbor or send to Falbaum's store in Cameron via the post."

The housewives planted vegetables and coaxed them along to canning time. But the growing season was short and so was the water. They churned butter and collected eggs for sale in Virginia City. The men hunted and fished to put food on the table and trapped to get a little cash for fencing. Some cleared trails for the Forest Service in the summer or hayed for local ranches. Everyone worked from dawn 'til dark, but still the living for most was hand-to-mouth.

In desperation, some turned to moonshining. In fact, it has been rumored that everyone on the Missouri Flats at one time or another indulged in a bit of bootlegging. True or not, many a full moon shone down on an active still far up a creek in a rugged canyon. Occasionally, the long arm of the law reached out and grabbed a culprit, but the business gurgled merrily on nonetheless. One sage remarked that the people were able to stick it out so long on the poor land of the Flats only because of the bootlegging.

Pioneering for some families lasted only a year or two. But the majority of the original homesteaders hung on for at least a decade and had the satisfaction of seeing the signature of the President of the United States on their Patents.

One by one, like nursery-rhyme Indians, the families departed until by the 'thirties just five die-hards remained. The drama was over. The colorful cast of characters had deserted the stage. Once again the scene was converted to the grazing of large herds of cattle by ranchers who snapped up the forsaken homesteads as they became available – a use far more suitable than farming.

Only a few forlorn and dilapidated cabins survive, standing bleakly on a hill or squatting in a lonely gulch. They serve as mute evidence of the hardy homesteaders of the Missouri Flats, who fought against insurmountable odds and lost.

Thus ends a brief but poignant chapter in the history of the Madison Valley

Gene's Fascinating Facts

Gene Welch shares with us some of his always current and interesting research

Importance of Top Predators

There have been some interesting findings on this subject as the result of the introduction of wolves to Yellowstone in 1995. Aspens are again regenerating in the Park after half a century. The recovery of aspens is not so much that wolves have reduced the elk population, but there is a "fear factor" operating. Elk are not so comfortable to hang out along the river and "hammer" the vegetation, because they feel more threatened there. Thus, recovery of aspens, cottonwoods and willows has been greatest in the riparian areas. More dense vegetation is expected to reduce erosion. A tree-ring study by William Ripple and Eric Larsen at Oregon State University showed that aspen had stopped regenerating soon after wolves were eliminated from the Park in the 1920s. See www.sciencemag.org - Science, vol. 317, 27 July 2007.

Greater Yellowstone Wolves

Wolves will be delisted as endangered beginning in late March and they will be managed as trophy game animals in Montana and Idaho (Montana was first with a management plan). Wyoming refused to conform and after years of resistance has apparently been permitted by the US Fish and Wildlife Service to kill wolves at "any time by any means". An article in the New York Times, January 2, 2008, p. A11, gives an interesting account of the trend in wolf numbers in the Greater Yellowstone Area and some attitudes of residents regarding delisting. Many residents are newly arrived (like us) and have different views than long-time residents.

Reminders:

- **Meeting** - Don't forget the Homeowner's Meeting on Saturday, June 28, 1PM, at the Howling Mad Moon Resort. You will be sent an official reminder with all details around the first week of June.
- **Garbage** - Please put all garbage in a bear-proof container or a secure location, like a locked garage. If you need a bear-proof container, contact Steve Primn at Keystone Conservation: (406) 682-5244. Steve can order one for you. Remember that our ranch is along major grizzly and black bear migration routes. Once a bear associates the scent of humans with a food reward, it becomes a physical danger to our health and life expectancies. These bears are known to enter homes (through unconventional means) and wreak havoc with the interior decorating. After your home is destroyed, then the bear is usually destroyed as well by authorities from Montana Fish and Game. (MRR Bylaws 6.8)

We actually had a good-sized black bear amble past our cabin last summer. She walked within 3 feet of our locked steel trash cabinet that we have used for 14 years. We were kind of hoping it might finally get put to a real test, but she didn't even turn her head as she walked by it.

- **Fires** – No open fires and no fireworks are allowed on the ranch. (MRR Bylaws – 6.20 and 6.21)
- **Light Pollution** – If you go out for an evening in town and need to leave an outdoor light on for your return – fine. But please be a good neighbor and turn it off when you get home; do not leave outdoor lights burning all night. Many of your neighbors love to sit outside and enjoy the incredible night sky in Big Sky County. (MRR Bylaws -6.17)

Thanks to Bill Hoolan, Larry Oltheim, Mike Wells, and Gene Welch for their excellent contributions. As always, please send or email me any questions, comments, or anything you think would be of interest to your neighbors, whether it's family news, recipes, reports from the ranch, stuff for sale, letters to the editor, etc. I really enjoy hearing from you!

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