

# GOD'S COUNTRY

By  
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**T**HE origin of the earth upon which I live was a cut and dried affair to me until a university professor expounded the planetesimal hypothesis. Until that moment, it had been a simple six-day job as related in the book of Genesis, King James version. Six days of extremely active labor and on the seventh day the Lord God found it good and rested! The theories of Moulton and Chamberlin were so disquieting that I retreated quickly to Genesis. And behold, it wasn't a six-day performance at all! Perhaps the ribs and vertebrae of a first-class earth but not the final fixin's. For example, by the end of the third day there was just *dry* land, a substance I was to learn a lot about in later years (it is even mentioned further on in this paper). But this unwatered condition continued for the entire first week of the creation, and it wasn't until the second week that the Lord got around to the necessity of a little rain. Genesis excuses the Creator for the reason that "there was not a man to till the ground," but, without man appearing, goes on to say that "there went up a mist from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground."

That's a delicious piece of description, "the mist that went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground." No wonder the Garden of Eden became a lush

haven for Adam and the proper setting for the rib incident, the trees of knowledge, and the beginnings of all our later troubles. Who would suppose that this salubrious locale would not be called "God's country"?

But the supposer would be in error. For man, the last of the creation, had arrogated to himself the privilege of selecting his Edens, down to the nomenclature thereof.

For instance, down in Kewanee, Henry County, where I was born, Jimmy Andrews, our perennial mayor, was heard to utter in the course of a Labor Day address these significant words, "We, who have been chosen to occupy the choicest spot on God's green footstool"—a kind of Ptolemaic conception of the universe with Henry County in a preferred position. When I grew a little older and crossed the Sierras I found the "golden west"—a color variant not expressly mentioned in Genesis. The native sons of that proud land had even stretched the point a bit. The Lord, by a process of natural selection, had planted there a race of supermen, for, as they said with feeling, "The cowards never started and the weaklings died on the way." They didn't get the ground mist much of the time out there—it is still dry land, except for the ditch water they purloin from Arizona and Colorado.

Well, these two instances, and there are many more, were just imitations of the real thing. You may call things green and golden and chosen but it remained for one section of the earth, not a large one either, to dismay and confound all of creation by one colossal, encyclopedic pretension. Out north of the Platte and west of the Missouri, the human imagination leapt to eternity—theirs was "God's country"! Here the Maker of the Universe had set aside a small preserve for his own private pleasure

ground. Very few inhabitants, just a smattering, but choice ones. Big, hearty people with warmer hearts and a stronger handclasp than anything east of Yankton, South Dakota! There were no trees to speak of—that misadventure in Eden might have inclined the Maker to a sparse disposition on that score. Not much ground mist either—the whole country was on the shy side in precipitation. But they had a sky, a vast, light-blue heaven that never ended, a bright sun, undulating plains of unbelievably rich grass, and it was all free for the taking. God's country! It had been saved for those of us who were young and romantic and had been begotten in God's green footstool. After all, these green places have their drawbacks! The mucky black soil of Henry County was too rich. The rainfall was too heavy. When 33 inches of water per year fell in decently spaced intervals upon that hateful dirt and a four-horse gang plow stirred it up with a slight frosting of cow manure, one hundred bushels of corn might burst from every cursed acre and there was hell to pay in the autumn. The yellow stuff was heavy as lead, long as a man's forearm, and glued to the shuck with sinews of steel. It required a steel husking peg to rip it loose from its moorings and inhuman strength to hurl it and a million of its fellows against a bang-board all day, and 9,000 bushels per year, per life, was a heft I can tell you. And after man had done all this, not to forget the cultivating and cross-cultivating and the cockle-burrs and the glory vines, he had to raise a mess of dirty hogs to consume this yellow peril. God's green footstool had no romance—just *corn*. Until Cyrus LeRoy Baldridge and I went to Peoria in the year 1909 and found a railway folder.

Baldridge, as some of you know, is now a famous American artist, but in 1909 he was just cornfed like the rest of us in Henry County. This folder we picked up was published by the Colonization Department of the Northwestern Railway and the copy had issued from the pen of a poet. I believe it read like this: "Come to the land of the Dakotas, the free land, the land where Nature has bestowed her choicest bounties in reckless profusion. Here, beneath the bluest of skies stretch the illimitable prairies, native home of the bison, the antelope and the grouse. Carpeted with succulent grasses, an inexhaustible source of food for millions of cattle, there lies beneath this age-old sod a treasure, whose sustenance shall provide the bread for all mankind. Your government has set aside a home for you in this blessed land, for you, your children and your children's children. One hundred sixty acres, a quarter section of this paradise is yours for the asking. Come to God's country, the last refuge and the only hope for you who dwell in fetid city or eke out a bare existence in the crowded acres of the east." No corn was mentioned! Corn rows versus illimitable prairies, the antelope versus the sow, the bread for all mankind! Well, since Peoria was both fetid and congested in August of 1909, the two of us boarded an emigrant train and embarked for Huron, South Dakota.

The romance was all there, with faint exceptions. The eyes of eighteen saw the happy land of the blue sky, the boundless prairie, the wheat shocks that marched in armies to the horizon. All one day our jerk-water train threaded its way amidst those never-ending shocks; the setting sun turned the wheeling ranks to polished gold, the dusk to purplish blue! The wind that fanned our

cager faces was sweet and dry and exhilarating! We pitched bundles for a month for one Tom Stone on a ranch of 600 acres—every acre produced at least fifty bushels of Number One Northern hard wheat; we drank the stinking sulphur water that burst from a pipe thrust barely into the earth, slept in a dirty haymow, fought mosquitoes such as New Jersey never knew, contracted the dysentery, and came back on a cattle train with fifty dollars apiece in our shoes and the romantic conviction that we had indeed been to God's country. What is that migrating frenzy in the cell structure of youth that selects the beautiful and overlooks the realities? It carried Baldrige to China, Africa, and Arabia. It burned in me throughout the college years, when my vacations led me always westward. There were summers in the Yellowstone, tooling a coach and four around the magic circuit of the Park; days as a guide in the Upper Geyser Basin—some of those incidents have been related to this Club. There was a summer on the Pacific for the business of luring the exposition visitors to the Yellowstone before they returned to the East. Each fall there was a reward by the president of my company, a postseason horseback excursion to out-of-the-way places—Jackson Hole, the Absorakas. Henry County seemed far away and benighted. What more natural than to start a law practice in the West and to bring my bride from congested Chicago to the land of my choice?

It was all new and romantic to her, too, in 1916. Journeys into the cool canyons of the Rockies where the rainbow struck at a feather, the blue grouse and the pintail flushed from any bit of sagebrush, and only a tarpaulin and a thin layer of air seemed to divide one from the blue-

white stars at night. Montana was a golden land in those days of 1916. The country was new, brilliant, unspoiled. Up in the foothills were the green valleys where the winter snows melted slowly and seeped out through the gravel to irrigate the wheat and alfalfa from beneath the surface. These were all possessed by the old-timers, who had spacious homes, good herds, stands of bees, orchards, the things of home. Down in the river bottoms were the willows and aspen, wood for building and fire, shelter for beast in winter. Upon the limitless plains was the prairie grass—"buffalo grass" they called it, because it had nurtured the buffalo. Some of it grew waist high, a waiving sea of lush plentitude. In it were all the prairie flowers, of color more brilliant than in our cloudier clime. Birds were everywhere, the song birds and the game fowl, and the land teemed with all forms of life that our eastern civilization had long ago driven out. I suppose that every boy has longed for the pioneer days of his homeland and believed as I did that he has arrived upon the scene too late. But here was Montana in 1916 promising all the adventure my forbears had once lived in the wilderness of Kentucky and Illinois. There were bear, deer, and elk, and mountain sheep a little farther away. Instead of fox hunting with the hounds, it was possible to break a leg in a gopher hole while coursing the much more elusive coyote.

There was hope in the air in those days! Thousands of settlers rolling in, coming in emigrant cars—boxcars with a stovepipe through the roof, all the farm machinery, furniture, seed wheat, and cows in one end and mother, children, and a cookstove in the other. These immigrants were not the ne'er-do-wells of the East; many were



the tenant farmers of Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota who had accumulated a stake and sought to pit it against their government's offer of free land. Their names were Oleson, Lundquist, Hafsos, Martin, Cunningham, Stone—Nordic people who loved the wind in their faces and the seas to look out upon. Out there, the East was not our East of New York and Boston; it was anything east of Fargo. One of them went "east," clear to Minneapolis. She was glad to come back west—there were too many trees in the east—a body couldn't see out anywhere!

When a new country feels the influx of many civilizations, profound forces are set free. Expendable wealth comes with the settlers and the country economically is enriched. New customs, new ideals, and the demand for education ride abreast of the emigrant train. Above all, the inspiring hopes of these multitudes uplift the spirit and a religious enthusiasm grips the populace. "Why, man, in this soil, this Russian wheat will make sixty to the acre; this land is untouched, all it needs is hard work, and that's what we've got plenty of!" The wave of immigration stimulated the professions; there was a demand for the young doctor and lawyer; it seemed to be the culmination of a dream—work to do and the romantic environment to do it in.

There was an interruption—April, 1917. "The Imperial German Government has failed to give us assurances." "We foresee a world made safe for Democracy." Two million of us to go overseas, most to come home. An unsettling interruption, jobs gone, clients gone, life to be picked up again at a fork of the road, and many choosing the wrong fork. But 1919 found us back in

God's country—we could hardly wait to get there in fact—that had been the alluring hope in muddy France, that was the beacon to call us back to the rolling plains and the brilliant sky—the war left behind. That was how we happened to land in Fairfield—a lumber corporation needed a lawyer to run its business and Fairfield was the headquarters town of the system.

Fairfield was a "dream" town, the vision of the lumberman with whom I was to be associated for two years. It was the only townsite on the Greenfields Bench, a plateau about forty miles west of Great Falls. The Greenfields name was a misnomer; the bench was dry, as dry as the third day of the creation. But, long ago, the Department of the Interior had planned that this immense tract of arid soil should be the site of an irrigation project, the water to come from the valley of the Sun River, forty miles to the west. Since the settlers of the Sun River Valley had pre-emptive water rights, the government had started the scheme with a small diversion dam at the mouth of Sun River Canyon, diverting into a miniature lake only the surplus second feet not taken by prior users in time of flood, and leading that minute quantity along a twisting, gravel-bottomed ditch to the Greenfields site. As the gravel was porous and the liquid refreshment small, about enough reached its destination to water the lawns of the project headquarters. All of this was but a promise for the future, but a promise that had not beguiled the farmers. Prior to 1917 there had been an unusual rainfall for several seasons, and the homesteaders petitioned the government to abandon plans for the proposed dam back in the Canyon; they said in their petition that the climate had changed—they needed no water and

furthermore didn't propose to have their lands charged with the cost of construction, upkeep, and usage. So the Greenfields Bench was dry, but in those days it was green because of unexpected moisture from the clouds and because of the wheat, which in spring was green and luxuriant and universal.

The Bench was more than a plateau—it resembled the deck of a ship with the prow thrust upward from a sea of land. This deck sloped gently eastward clear to the Missouri River; south lay the Sun River Valley; north were the "breaks," rough land falling to a lower plateau; west was the escarpment, the jumping-off place, where one might peer across a dark valley to the darker foothills of the Rockies.

Right about where the captain's bridge might be, stood the Fairfield townsite, a whole section, a square mile of flatness cut up into hundreds of twenty-five-foot lots. In composing an Eden here, the developers had not been guided by the scale of the country, but from the East had imported that miserable, arbitrary unit, twenty-five feet. At the frontage price one might well have developed an acre, but so imitative and restrictive is the soul of man that each little dwelling in that great out-of-doors adhered solemnly to those confining boundaries and was built meanly and narrowly to conform to the unholy system. Stranger still, those owners had actually chosen homesites at random on the face of that vast plain, as though there were any possible difference between blocks 27 and 56! As a result, the thirty or forty new homes which greeted us were scattered about the townsite like frightened children; surely an explosion from a common

center had blown these small white building blocks in every direction.

But not so the merchants of commerce! Fairfield had a "main drag," Central Avenue, and for two entire blocks along this 100-foot boulevard marched shoulder to shoulder the business emporiums of the town, all one-story stores with two-story fronts. Beginning at the Milwaukee tracks (a branch line), came first the City Elevator, a gray spire that completely dominated the plain. Followed the implement shop and tractor salesroom of Don Davies, the local mechanical expert. Alex Champion the butcher and grocer was next. Alex would have no "truck" with city beef; he slaughtered his native stuff in a lean-to at the rear, let it hang for a day, and then started his carving operations by way of a hindquarter. The customer purchased his meat according to Alex's progress along the steer and there could be no skipping and no variance in the price—twenty-five cents a pound. On Monday it was round steak, Tuesday rump, Wednesday loin or porterhouse, Thursday ribs, Friday round again, Saturday brisket, and Sunday the populace repaired to Ching Woy's and had fricasseed chicken. Naturally, the volume of business lent the spice of uncertainty to Alex's progression. Across from the Champion store was the combination barber shop, pool hall, and ice-cream pavilion of Al Mazingo, the local wit. Al was destined to become the victim of a horrid plot engineered by the druggist, who also sold ice cream; it was alleged in secret that ice cream that came from a barber shop might not conform to the standards of purity so essential to a new and growing metropolis. Fairfield had a crossroads, the intersection of Central Avenue and First Avenue

South. In the center of this broad plaza stood a gigantic Oregon fir, pared down to flag-pole size, and at its foot, the better to divide the teeming traffic to come, was a circular bandstand for the concerts that were never to be held. At the four corners of this arterial confluence were respectively Paul Callow's Drug Store, the First National Bank (capital \$25,000.00), Mort Hirschberg's Economy Mart, and Oscar Holmberg's Hardware Shop. Beyond were the post office, the Zimmerman House (a real two-story hotel with eight rooms and no plumbing), and, lastly, the domicile of the press, the *Fairfield Times* (Fred Schoensigel, proprietor). There were other and minor shops but the ones I have mentioned were the "Who's Who" of Fairfield. Away on the prairie were two rather large buildings, the township school and a long, story-and-a-half Community Hall. A blacksmith shop and lumber yard completed the business scene. Fairfield had no gas, water, electricity, sewage system, police force, or crime. There was no doctor, dentist, or hospital within twenty-five miles; nor a telephone to talk to one's neighbor and the outside world. It was the aerie of the eagle, an abode for the young and strong!

But it had its points! Everything was new and clean and white. The glistening paint of the buildings in that rarified air and brilliant sunlight made them look twice as large as they were; the inhabitants were friendly and helpful; they all looked with kindness upon the newcomers from the East, especially upon the lady with a piano.

I shall not weary you with the problems of living in a raw western village, the mechanics of pulling water from far down with a gas engine and a pumpjack; the method

of creating a septic tank out of two pickle barrels and a half-dozen ells and nipples; the scheme of heating a four-room cottage with a stove euphoniously called "Peach-blo," fired with lignite—termed "lugnite" in Fairfield because one lugged coal and ashes day and night. Nor shall I brag of the six poplar trees in Fairfield, the only trees upon that tableland, nurtured to a height of four feet by Marn Skara the Finn woman. My eyes are upon the larger scene.

For, about the time that we arrived, there was a portent of strange days to come. It was becoming a little drier. This had always been dry country; the few preceding years had been wetter; now the rains had let up and the settlers who had lived a few days in a moist dispensation began to sniff the air and wonder about that old subject the climate. But something had happened in the meanwhile that had never before occurred in all the million-year history of this land. The immigrant had ripped up the virgin sod in the war years and made it a bed for his wheat. He was not solely to blame for this error. The slogan had been "food will win the war." The House of Morgan had backed Tom Campbell in the planting of fifty thousand acres of grassland near Billings; the price of wheat had gone up and up, from a dollar to two seventy-five a bushel. The "people" of America staked the grower to seed and gasoline and posts and wire—plant the wheat and win the war! What a bonanza time that had been; many an eastern farm tenant with \$200 in his jeans had gambled in the spring and reaped \$10,000 in the fall. Wheat was not like corn; after you drilled it into the soil, the driller could retire to the pool hall until September. Of course the easy money went as easy money goes.

But none of them were thinking about the dry land and the grass that covered it. Neither the despoilers nor the government nor the railroads. Dry land is not desert; it is relatively dry; perhaps ten inches of rainfall instead of thirty-three, and that often spaced in spasmodic periods. Nature had compensated for this moisture deficiency with a covering of buffalo grass to act as a conservator of her rainfall. The roots of this blanket ran clear down to water, twenty to thirty feet deep. These were channels to conduct the water deep into the soil and hold it there under a tough insulating blanket of roots and grass against the drought that was bound to come. In the first moist days of spring, this grass grew alarmingly and as suddenly dried and cured in the sun and became the world's best natural cattle food. The dry land was therefore a cattle country and had been so regarded since the days of the Civil War when Fort Shaw, near-by, was established. Fortunes had been made in cattle and the financial barons of Montana's larger cities were rich from cattle or minerals. Later had come the sheep in the foothills and government reservations; during the war that business, too, was expanded, and the land was overgrazed because wool, raw wool, brought fifty cents a pound.

When we struck Fairfield the crops were fine, but not maturing as expected. In July the bottom fell out of their economic system. Wheat tumbled from \$2.75 to \$1.00 and wool from fifty cents to a dime a pound. Both happened in twenty-four hours and without warning. One day John Carmichael, with fifty thousand pounds of wool in the warehouses at Helena, was a Croesus; the next morning his banker was in the wool business. On Thursday

Sam Markham, with an elevator full of the \$2.75 wheat, was about to retire to California; on Friday he could just make his gas and plowing bill. That was worse than Black Friday in 1929. But it didn't phase the Fairfieldians! They were looking ahead. Their spring crop had stopped growing in June; most of it was too short for the header bar of the combine; they would turn it under and try sowing fall wheat. The snows were bound to bring that up in the spring and, if it were dry again, they might finish an early crop ahead of the drought. Furthermore, dollar wheat was no good; might as well use it for seed. That September the whole countryside became a plowed field; the sower was jealous even of the tiny islands of grass that stood on stony uplands—it all went under the breaker; cheap, dollar seed pouring into the brown earth.

As the last acres were turning gray in the sun, a breeze crept down from the mountains, a gentle, refreshing wind smelling faintly of pine and the green canyons whence it had sprung. It dawdled lazily across the plowed furrows, gently nudging at the nodules of earth, rolling them over and smoothing them into the hollows. Here and there a lone wisp of grass remained to dance in the wind. By nightfall the breeze had freshened; it was colder and humans sought the lee of friendly buildings. The populace retired early in Fairfield to dream of the first green shoots of the wheat and the bumper crop next year. At midnight they were awakened by the roar of the sea. There were seafaring pioneers thereabouts, and they knew it was the sea, because the wind that swept their homes was like no wind that ever blew on land before. The winds of heaven blow in gusts and blasts and swirls and tornadoes, but this wind was a steady, solid mass of air without let



or hindrance; the house was a rock in a raging river, the air as solid as water. It blew hour after hour, fifty miles of it flowing past every hour—never a rattling shutter or banging gate to break the dread monotony; all of these were frozen fast to their moorings by a current that had mass and substance and power and would not stop for the wink of an eyelash. After two hours of this, the householder was dead certain that he was afloat and began to pray that his boat would strike a snag. The wind was so solid and continuous that it knifed across the chimney top and smothered his fire; the coals in his stove must be quenched to avoid asphyxiation. In Fairfield they experienced something new—this air was thick as it pried in around the sash, thick with dust. Their fields were en route to the Red River Valley. The clocks turned their hands but no daylight came. At eight in the morning it was still like midnight; a solid wall of grayish-black obscured the world, even to the front gate. People had to eat and drink but no one could get water from his well; many a settler battled valiantly with a pump handle, but the liquid was atomized at the spout. One such contrived a trap with a length of hose and a potlid for his pail; he came back with an inch of mud in the bottom.

A few daring souls, impelled by curiosity or necessity, stumbled through this evil fog to seek a neighbor or tend to business. They met a handful of scarecrows, muffled in silk or bandannas, faces streaked with mud and tears, spluttering as from a gas attack. No cars ventured out because lights were useless and carburetors, like human lungs, quickly choked and ceased their function. No trains ran on the branch—life was dormant and the settlers spent their waking hours plugging doors and win-

dows. Weak nerves crumpled under the dread monotony of the wind, which blew on and on for forty-eight hours and then ceased abruptly. The profound silence after this two-day attack was as shocking as the silence of the late Armistice. We crawled forth to survey what was left of our world. West was the crystal-clear, red glow of sunset; east a towering black cloud, our topsoil speeding for the Dakotas. No paint on the westerly elevation of our homes—completely sandblasted. No seed in the ground—the fields as smooth as sand dunes, but mounded here and there where a remnant of the prairie grass had withstood the hurricane and added unto itself a hillock of the heavier soil. The few animals on the bench were half-dead from thirst, and many perished from dust pneumonia.

What does one do after such a visitation? The project farmers knew. They called a meeting and passed a resolution for the benefit of the Department of the Interior: “. . . the climate has changed again—hurry up with the big dam—we want water now!” The water had been beneath their feet for eons of time, but, through ignorance, they had given it to the winds and with it the best of their substance. Passing a resolution is easier than bringing back the grass! After the wind there was no more fall planting; it was hoped that the heavy snows would come and soak the soil and once again promote the easy prosperity that had been theirs.

The snows did come, and very early that year, but again and again came the same wind to blow them away. That was the winter of the “dry blizzards” and the cold. Abnormal cold; cold more intense than often is known in the arctic. Once at Havre, Montana, I saw the thermom-

eter at 64 below zero. On three consecutive days I inventoried lumber yards at 35, 40, and 46 below. And I experienced two blizzards, one as late as the next April, both of them while traveling in a car and both of them "dry blizzards." In Illinois we had had blizzards—the kind that Whittier described in "Snowbound," where roads were blocked by the drifts, fences erased, and the countryside transformed.

A dry blizzard contains hardly any snow; it uses the material already on the ground, and on the western plains the ground snow is dry and powdery. My initiation occurred in December while driving home from the mountains in a closed car, across a high plateau. It was a bright, sunny afternoon, so warm and delightful that the windows were open. The car spun along silently, for the wheels were in the deep, soft ruts of a desert trail; no need for touching the wheel—it stayed put in a pair of ten-mile grooves. I knew that about midway on this bench was a junction, an unmarked point where seven trails crossed, each winding away over the hills apparently to oblivion, but eventually ending in some far village, each picked unerringly by the local inhabitants to the utter stupefaction of a visitor. Beyond the junction about five miles was the "drop-off" on my trail, a zig-zag down three hundred feet into the valley; an easy descent in the light of day.

A few hundred yards behind me came a large black sedan, its passengers five salesmen whom I had met in the hotel at my last stopping place. They could not pass nor could I turn out of the track—but who would wish to hurry on a day so warm and delightful? I happened to look to the north and saw a strange cloud formation, a black pencil

line drawn across the sky at an elevation of ten degrees. Beneath that line was a dark, tumbling cloud bearing down upon us with the faraway roar of a locomotive. I closed the windows, pushed the throttle to the floor and was swallowed up. A white hand wiped across the windshield and the world was gone, even the cap on the radiator. The thin snow on the prairie was picked up and spun in a million eddies over and under and all about; it seeped past the pedal slots and filled the car with a fine flour; it brought with it the bitter cold and hands and feet began to burn. The motor purred on at forty miles an hour; the wheels were still in the ruts. Shades of high-school algebra—at forty miles an hour, when shall I pass the junction and reach the escarpment to tumble over and over or nose my way down the twisting path? The wind had become a shrill whistle; the sun was gone; it was black in the car and the headlights made only a white mist in the void through which I whirled. In such a predicament, one guesses, and this guess happened to be right. Of a sudden the brake was pushed down, the car tipped and careened to the right and there was the valley, golden in sunlight, calm and undisturbed, and I shaking and talking to myself the rest of the way home. Two days later someone found the black car, its five occupants frozen stiff; two were in the sedan, the other three a few yards away upon the snow—they had stopped and tried to find a trail to shelter. In the *Chicago Tribune* of March 17, in this year of 1941, is the story of a blizzard in the Dakotas and Minnesota—forty-seven dead and twenty missing. I should like to quote one sentence: "The highways were lined with cars driven off the road by the wind which brought with it light but swirling snow, after several

days of springlike weather." That too was a "dry blizzard," still indigenous to God's country.

That winter stories began to filter in of homesteaders frozen in their tar-paper shacks. A lone occupant with plenty of fuel would build up his fire and retire under his "hogans" (quilts we call them). In the windy night, the fire would burn out, the cold creep in. The sleeper stirred but the exhaustion of days of this battle had numbed his consciousness. Then the bliss of complete sleep and the coroner. Occasionally a neighbor found him in time to freight him to the hospital for amputations—luckier, many of them had slept away.

In late December came our one deep snow, followed by a brief thaw and freeze. It put an icy crust upon the countryside. The wild range horses were hard put to get at what grass the plowman had left; they could be seen breaking the crust with their hooves, pawing through to the grass beneath, and their fetlocks were bloody from the jagged ice. Drove of them died, and in the spring their skeletons whitened the landscape. But not entirely in vain! One hardy settler had built a cave-like structure into the brow of a hill facing south—made it of railroad ties and miraculously assembled enough old sash for a glass front. Here he tended a flock of one hundred hens and, as the range horses died, he sallied forth on his bony nag and with his lariat dragged in the frozen animals for hen food. Vitamins were then undiscovered, but the hens thrived mightily and a certain hotel in the Falls purveyed many a gross of those fortified eggs that winter at thirty cents a portion.

Still another opportunist waited for the spring when the vultures, the rodents, and the ants should polish up

his quarry, then gathered the bones in his truck, carloads of them, which he sent east to a button factory. His cars were spotted on the Fairfield siding and the gentle westerly winds carried the nostalgic memory of Chicago's packingtown.

The most macabre sight of that winter was a cattle yard in the outskirts of Choteau, the county seat. On an afternoon when a Chinook was blowing—that soft, warm wind from the Pacific—a dealer drove a score of fat Herefords into the railroad pens for shipment the next morning. He left them when the thermometer stood at fifty above. That night a cold front rolled down from Alaska and the bulb dropped to fifty below. The stock could not drift before the wind and find a coulee or river grove. They crowded into a leeward corner of the pens and froze, standing up. For weeks thereafter travelers entering Choteau saw the frozen herd, their red and white coats glistening in the sun, but their upright forms immobile in the grasp of ice. Charles Russell, famous western artist, came up from the Falls to look at them. The sight stirred in his mind far memories of the incident which had started him on his career, the painting of one surviving animal of a herd of ten thousand in the dread winter of '88.

The rest of the winter was dry, cold, and snowless. A final blizzard in April and the spring broke overnight. The dun hills became a lovely yellow-green and in the foothills the lambs were springing like popcorn from every rock and bush. The wheat went in, came up, rose to a foot in height and stopped. No rain! A little water in the ditch but not enough to go around. The hot winds arrived in June, winds that blistered one side of your face if

you rode east or west any distance. Some of the wheat developed, but at a height too low for cutting. The drought seemed to have brought along a lot of plagues. First the cutworms, white grubs burrowing through the earth an inch beneath the surface and snipping off the tender stems of every growing thing. The wise men said they could be checked. "They liked the moonlight; they held a dance upon the surface every night and a hefty roller would crush the life out of the pests." It would crush the crop too! As I shall tell you later, I became almost famous for my cutworm remedy. After the cutworms the grasshoppers, clouds of the buzzing things, came to sweep the fields like a floor—not the entire bench, but spots here and there. Another opportunist appeared. Elmer Genger's boy, Junior, saw a bonanza in that visitation. He rigged a tin funnel on the front of his father's Ford and collected bushels of hoppers, dried them, and went to Stanford on the dividends. Chickens relish hoppers as well as horses!

Then came the gophers or ground squirrels, an illogical plague. In the driest summer of recorded Montana history, the ground simply sprouted these pests. Strangely, they elected to burrow by the millions at the exact intersections of the roads; it was suggested that the hardened earth at these points had kept the soil beneath somewhat moist. But there they were, a thousand at every turn of the road, standing erect, darting across the path, undisturbed at the rushing cars. Travelers closed their eyes and drove through the unprotesting mass of little bodies. As quickly as they came, they disappeared—a Malthusian departure I suppose.

Finally we were visited by the greatest scourge of all—the Russian thistle, the tumbleweed. No one of us had ever seen this plant before; it might have arrived with ill-cleaned seed. In July there were small green knobs all over the landscape, a luscious, edible-looking green. Soon each knob was a soft, fluffy ball that waxed and flourished at a rate beyond all belief. No one knew then that it possessed a taproot going down to China. Nor did the livestock know that the succulent leaves concealed a deadly barbed spine to puncture a cow's stomach and kill it overnight. Who would dream that some day this fluffy ball of verdant hue would become brown and firm and springy, burst from its taproot, and go bounding across the prairie like a thing bewitched? The dictionary calls it by a beautiful name—an "amaranth," meaning in the Greek, "not to wither." It withered not nor did it stale. Freed from its earthly nursery by the first cool zephyr of autumn, it spread its every spine, gathered unto itself its thousand or two coil springs, and soared into space to become the despair of mankind. To eyes that had braved the blizzard, watered in the blast, and dimmed with the retreat of hope, the spectacle of that whirling dervish of the flatlands, bounding along and spinning dizzily between bounds, was the final assurance of cataclysm! Drylanders, upon first observing that horrid sight, had been known to cackle foolishly and grovel upon the earth, shielding the eyes as this mad engine whirled abaft their vision. The land crawled with these brown creatures, they were alive. Once, from a train window, I saw the entire surface of the earth, clear to the horizon, moving and weaving with this flood. It was unbearable—seasickness—but *mal de mer* is green, as everyone knows, and



these waves were brown. Later in the journey we arrived at a cut in the right of way, thirty feet deep and filled to the brim with Russian thistle. We waited an hour while the crew burned them out; another hour for the rails to cool. At the next town we saw the only "Russian Thistle Rodeo" ever performed. It was the little village of Vaughn, Montana, where the business district was built about a square. The tumbleweeds had invaded this open park; surrounding buildings created a whirlpool and here, in the center of things, a pile of thistle was mounting, ever higher. At its perimeter every solitary inhabitant, from babyhood to old age, armed with a pitchfork was engaged in corralling these whirling, bounding, blitzing objects. With a shift in the wind the pyramid might gyrate toward the general store—one spark of fire and the town would be ablaze! Away rushed the populace, pulling and tugging at the pile like tumblebugs at their ball of dung; out from the frenzied herders rushed a lone rider valiantly spearing a maverick seeking to desert the common mass. They were besieged continuously by new arrivals, rolling forms that darted in between the buildings, whirling about like frightened cattle. The battle ended when a vacant lot offered an exit and the whole brown mountain slid between two stores and rolled ponderously off across the prairie. The battle of Vaughn was won!

The rest of the trip was a portrayal of the destructiveness of Nature on the march. Wire fences could not withstand the onslaught. The first few tumbleweeds caught on the wires and plugged the holes. In a moment a wind-row, fence high, then ten, twenty feet—tons of weight that awaited but a gust. When it came, the posts snapped

and the ribald band galloped off for the next obstacle. One insignificant thistle would cuddle up to the windward side of a garage or one of those tiny outbuildings, precursor to our more abundant life, and cunningly await its fellow. Inevitably it arrived with a thousand companions. Locking arms, they mounted and shoved and man's noble achievement crashed to earth! Allhallow's Eve in God's country!

But through the drought, the winds, the cold, and the desolation, how fared our life in Fairfield, the metropolis of the Greenfields Bench, that meant-to-be oasis in the sky, tip-tilted like the ship that rode the drying sea? Well, the irrigation headquarters was green; its ten acres of alfalfa was a sight to behold. The rest of us fed on scenery, but its nourishment came from the little snow water in the ditch. By some governmental legerdemain the flow was increased, and we were told that we of the townsite might have enough water to bring up and irrigate a garden. Of course we jumped at the chance. There were no laterals, those small branches that stem from the main channel. I recall digging one for two blocks through the hardened crust with a pick, a crowbar, and a tile shovel. There was no transit to run a level, but just the unerring eye of the pioneer—a poor instrument, I was to discover.

A brother who still chose to live in the benighted land of Illinois had sent me, of all things, some choice seed corn, a variety called golden bantam; also a mess of peas, telephone peas (the name was to have no significance until later). Could it be a nostalgia for the lush fields of the Sucker State that impelled my frenzied digging every eve till moonrise, pulverizing the brick-like earth, leveling

out the garden for the water, planting the seed prayerfully as though it held a promise long deferred? The potatoes at least were western; they were Idahos. The seed didn't sprout and I knew it must be irrigated up! This was a new art to a tenderfoot, but there were instructions. The seed rows must be kept in a dry mulch and the water should touch only the channels between; otherwise the row tops would bake and the plants when they emerged would sun-scald.

The Saturday afternoon arrived when the man with the hoe was to open the floodgates and bring life to his parched acre. It was a poetic conception after all—we of the dry lands could reach out across that forty-mile gulf to the Rockies, dip into its limpid streams, lave the parched earth and make it a paradise! I leapt the back fence, hoe in hand—my spirits were high and I am sure I cleared the top strand by a yard—and trotted across the prairie to the main sluice box. What a sight! Flowing past in crystal purity was the essence of all the snows of winter, this lovely, docile stream that was to become my ally and my salvation. There was no need for hurry—the moment induced contemplation. As far as one could see across the landscape the water was still cascading through the ditch as though it would roll on forever. Idly I pulled the gate and the limpid waters gushed through the aperture. Then things began to happen. What was this turbid giant that boiled into my home-made lateral, this tawny flood eating away my crumbling walls and debouching upon the plain? The limpid prisoner had become a muddy beast-at-large. I flailed with the hoe like a man possessed while blobs of newly manufactured mud rained about me in showers. I ran hither

and yon, patching a broken bank, damming an embryo lake—but generally the water was ahead, careening to the next obstruction, hissing out across the fields and never quite reaching its destination. Time and again I shut the gate to repair the damage, hoping now that my channel would hold. At last the clay had drunk its fill, the walls were solid, the level was attained, and into my garden purred the mountain stream, rippling in the late afternoon sunlight but still possessed of the demoniac capacity of seeking its meanest level. Did I find myself in one of those breathless periods gazing longingly at the sky, whence from boyhood the water had seemed to come in evenly spaced little droplets, wetting without flood the just and the unjust?

But the water brought up the crop. In that virgin earth and beneath a blazing sun the peas shot up to seven feet—telephone peas had something to do with telephone poles no doubt. It took all the chicken wire I could rustle in the townsite to keep ahead of those peas, gallons of pods every morning and night. The potatoes broke the earth, too, with their pinkish leaf buds. Finally the green shoots of the corn, that old "enemy" of the East. There is a tender yellow-green in young corn shoots unlike any other green beneath the sun; the edges are bluish but the heart of the leaf is yellow, and when the husbandman looks upon his corn rows, trembling in the wind, the spectacle of this fresh life and the fullness in prospect fills his heart with summer gladness. There was, too, the matter of an obligation about this corn business—the eastern brother would require a report as to his seed, reason enough for all this hoeing and mulching and flopping about like a scarecrow to bring the water to this crop!

The corn shoots were fully ten inches high when catastrophe came. At lunchtime I must take a squint at the corn before returning to work. A dozen of the proud blades lay withered upon the earth, here and there two or three in a hill. I dug down with my fingers—the corn was eaten off an inch beneath the surface. I dug farther and unearthed the villain—cutworms! My hours with the hoe, my race with the water—all to be undone by a fat, white grub with a brown snout and chilled-steel jaws. In the press of necessity men rise above their times! Great issues are at stake and hidden powers come to the rescue. Witness Edison in search of a carbon filament for his “glow-bottle.” It led him to his wife’s palm-leaf fan! Then and there I discovered the remedy for cutworms. Some instinct impelled me to rush to the drug store, where I purchased a pound of moth balls, and into each hill, at the four points of the compass, went one moth ball—there was no sense to this act, just pure genius. Some of the scientific lights of the Chicago Literary Club will tell you that worms can’t smell! I don’t know! But day after day I watched those corn hills, and never again did one sturdy soldier fall to the foe. And, when I excavated for the moth balls, as all pure scientists must do, cuddled about several I found the remains of the invader. I exhibited all this to my best beloved, under solemn injunction of secrecy. I was assured it would not be breathed to a soul: the very absurdity of such a remedy insured the utter inviolability of the secret. I know and she is certain that the story was neither torn nor softly emitted from her lips, but months later, while fishing with a rancher clear across the range in the Dearborn River Country, when the fishing had been fine and we were feasting on

breast of grouse and steelhead trout, he suddenly ceased eating, impaled me with a glassy stare, and said, "Say you! Ain't you the guy that discovered cutworms loved moth balls?" That wasn't the last time I was to hear about my startling remedy!

But there is a denouement to all such happenings—they call it "the pay-off" now. First, the thing worked! Every last blade became a corn stalk and a burden-bearer; it was a prize crop and the first corn to be grown in God's country. Finally, only two years ago, the Department of Agriculture of this government belatedly discovered that the remedy for cutworms is paradichlorobenzine, and paradichlorobenzine is the stuff of which the common, household moth ball is made. Such treasures as are withheld for decades from science; buried in the depths of a human soul by the jibes of mankind!

Life on the Greenfields Bench was not all drought, disaster, and plagues. The horror of living in a country fast sinking into ruin was relieved by the spirit and character of the people. They were not cultured; they had few books, little music, no art except that of the mechanic. But they possessed an abiding hunger for those refinements and, like Lincoln in the wilderness, no price was too high for the securing of those blessings. Occasionally a visiting preacher came to the Community Hall on a Sunday; the building was packed an hour in advance of the service. A "home-grown" lending library was set up in the drug store; it had to stagger along because the books would not come back—they were being passed about in the far places. When John Zimmerman of the Zimmerman House, also our expressman, unloaded our furniture and discovered a piano in the shipment, the

word spread like wildfire. That afternoon the sharer of my sorrows was invited to attend Fairfield's exclusive and only female society, the W.C.T.U. The "white-ribbon band" had come west in the emigrant cars, and they had kept the new country "dry," alcoholicly at least. They wanted the newcomer to join them, to feel at home, and to help with their noble program. A slight hitch developed when the neophyte chose not to sign the pledge, which in some remote day might be broken, but she received the white silken badge just the same and was duly inducted into the society of Fairfield's elect. Immediately it was suggested that the next meeting might be held with a musical program and, there being but one piano on the project, the winds of fate pointed in the direction of our abode.

The meeting was to be at two o'clock of a sunny fall day, and preparations had been made for a normal complement of twenty guests. The "lady from the East" glanced out the living-room windows at half past one and was astonished at what she saw. From all directions, like the spokes of a wheel, files of women trudged across the landscape each leading from one to three children, all converging upon a hub which seemed to be our modest home. A glance through the other windows confirmed the fact of the hegira—the "grapevine" had functioned well and all of the feminine population of the Greenfields Bench were coming to see the "city lady" who had a piano and could play it. Soon the rooms were filled to bursting, latecomers and children taking to the floor. Mort Hirschberg rushed over all his cookies; Al Mazingo the last of his ice cream and milk; sandwiches were turned out by the social committee as are extras from the

press! After all had eaten, the hostess proposed a piano solo to a great nodding of heads. It was Chopin's "Polonaise"—that dashing, thrilling, brilliant selection; it rattled the bolts in our lovely "Peachblo" stove and shook the sash of our frail cottage, but must have stunned its audience, for at its conclusion there was a consuming silence, not a word, not a gesture of applause. After a terribly long moment a brave soul volunteered the best compliment an artist may hear, "Ef its all the same to you, I would jest like to hear that all over again." At this there was an ear-splitting applause, and of course the immortal sang again in those crowded rooms with more fervor and deeper spirit even than before. There were other selections, more nodding and bowing, and at the conclusion the audience, with hardly a word, marched away across the plains, spreading out fanwise in the slow trudge that carried the message of music even to the jumping-off place.

There was another notable assemblage in Fairfield—the time when the United States senatorial committee came junketing to the project to see if we needed water, if the big dam should be built, if the Benchers had changed their minds with the climate. They drove up from the Falls in giant touring cars; they wore dusters and sombreros and were an impressive galaxy as they entered our flag-draped Community Hall for a chicken dinner and speechifying and a question-and-answer hour with the settlers. They were impressive looking men, these "elect" from the sacred chamber at Washington—men of flawless diction and wondrous voices that boomed across the rafters of the barn-like building in which they spoke. They castigated the settlers for their optimism of the past, they recited by chapter and verse the testimony of



some of those in the audience who had appeared before a senatorial committee years before, insisting that the climate had changed and that there was no need for expensive water. One quickly gained the impression that the day was lost—that this was just a holiday for the Senators, who had come to say "I told you so!"

Then Martin Hafsos, a giant Swede, answered them in his broken tongue. Yes, he had been down to Washington and had objected, but he had made a mistake—the climate hadn't changed. God had been too good to the settlers for a little while. He had been good to the Senators sometimes, and occasionally he had withheld his favors even from them. Martin quoted the scriptures—he likened himself to the Prodigal Son—he was now eating husks and they might at least fatten up the calf for his return. He, too, quoted chapter and verse about the late war—the senatorial injunction about raising wheat—his two sons had gone to save democracy and one had remained forever overseas. When Martin had finished we were all proud of our own native product. And the Senators didn't speak any more; the meeting was adjourned and the junket, back in the Capitol, approved the dam.

That fall and winter were to bring to a close our sojourn in the land where "Nature bestowed her *rarest* bounties in *reckless* profusion." The populace was departing the country. The same fall wind had come to find the earth dry and helpless before its onslaught. The fields were pitted with blowouts. Sometimes the dust vanished to the east, but much of it moved across the land as advancing dunes, burying the fences, farm machinery, and even the one-room shacks with the boxcar roofs. Roads disappeared, and in spots the irrigation ditch became a

snaky boulevard of dust. Some of the settlers walked out, abandoning everything. Most of them packed the family and what they could carry into the battered car and wheezed away. Not to California, as the Okies of later years, but to the east, and on the tail of the jallopy smeared in chalk rode the legend, "Back to the wife's folks." In 1920 the wife still had "folks" and they lived east; by 1938 the "folks" must have passed on and California was the promised land. John Steinbeck portrayed nothing original in his novel on the cataclysm of the dust-bowl; he only spoke in a time when the disaster was geographically larger and the readers socially receptive. The settlers of the Greenfields Bench, and for hundreds of miles about, had long ago lived every experience that the Okies knew.

There were a few last vignettes to embellish the memory of the final months. Choice days of hunting with the hill people, those who had kept the pledge of the sod—their cattle were still sleek. The dry land was a nightmare, a pageant of desolation. Fences sagged or were buried. Houses stood bare and black, their doors banging in the wind—little glass in the sash—tin chimney pipes rooted at a crazy angle. No vehicles were met on the road—it was a land where man had come and despoiled and disappeared as completely as the Mayas. It was easy to understand how civilizations in the Central Americas had vanished, leaving no record of the reason for their going. A later period of moisture might make our land to bloom and pose the question to the newcomers, "Why did life end here?"

We were to see another Christmas in Fairfield, a kind of joyless season. The local merchants had found a few

dry-landers in the coves and coulees; some of them had children. There were no toys in the country—we made them as a community enterprise out of things at hand. The dowling in a lumber-yard stockroom, plus paint and feminine artistry, may become a doll that dry-land daughters cherish. Also, the tin washers that hold the tarpaper upon a tarpaper shack serve as acceptable wheels to a little red homemade wagon for the boys.

Down in the valley of the Sun River, at Fort Shaw, the records of the weather had been kept since 1864. They were available for all to see, but few came to read the charts and attempt, by history, to pierce the future. Most of us prefer to study goose quills and the fur on animals and the habits of the squirrel. We did see them, and they predicted a prolonged drought. That is why we returned to the benighted land of Illinois in 1921, arriving in Chicago just about the time that Al Capone was to start his empire.

We have never been back to God's country, but the stories keep filtering through. There were five years of drought, then a few good years. The big dam in the Sun River Canyon was constructed, and the Greenfields Bench has recently become a resettlement project for the Okies. The water is there, because once yearly I receive a bill for construction charges and water rates on my quarter-section on the lower bench. Not long ago I had a letter from a settler, offering to buy the remains of the ranch-house, once considered an investment. It said, "What do you want for your house near Ashuelot? It isn't worth much any more! The wild horses has got in and tromped out the floor." The letter was worth while; I gave it to a field adjuster of the Internal Revenue Department who

had protested my charge-off for depreciation. With tears in his eyes, he allowed my deduction.

But last summer I learned of the final chapter in the land cycle of Montana. For five years the Civilian Conservation Corps has been giving the dry land back to nature. For three hundred miles, along the northern border, the Corps has removed every post and strand of wire, razed or burned all buildings, filled each foundation, and built dams in all the coulees. The buffalo grass has come back, and where the land was denuded in too great areas it has been sodded with little squares which spread and coalesce and nail the soil down with a blanket of ageless resistance. The prairie flowers have returned, ducks are breeding in the ponds. The Russian thistle has disappeared, choked out by the smothering grass roots. A man on horseback can pursue the jack rabbit and the coyote all day without once leaping a fence, but there is still a gopher hole to entrap his steed. Old-timers say the country looks like the days of 1910, before the emigrant train appeared.

Perhaps it *is* God's country after all. In the terrible days of 1920, my spouse was heard to say when I called it by that name, "Well, God can have it." But, if it is left alone, left in grass to feed the cattle as it once fed the bison, the Peoria poet may have been right. Perhaps I should go back—just to *see*!

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