

# LIFE IN MONTANA

by

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Submitted by Mary Ann (Olson) Carlson, 2012/02/18

How did I get to Montana? My grand father, N. C. Jensen, took up a homestead on the south half of Section 12 on Shover Creek, 12 wagon road miles south of the small town of Musselshell in Musselshell County, Montana in 1913. The family, wife Ethelyn, children, Helen, Bernice, (my mother age 11) and Clayton came from Minnesota the following year after a log house with a dirt roof was livable. Grandpa lived on that homestead and in that house the remainder of his life (late 1950's). Roundup (the county seat) was about 27 miles and 90 miles to Billings.

The country in that area of Musselshell County consisted of rolling hills with a thin scattering of ponderosa pine and a lot of large sand stone rock out croppings. The open areas were thinly covered with short growing Buffalo grass that was quite nutritious, but a lot of acres were required to support many animals. The weather was tough. Summers were hot and dry and the winters very cold. I recall 60 degrees below zero. Grasshopper infestations occurred occasionally and caused considerable damage to crops. There also were a few rattle snakes. Not a very hospitable place to try to eke out a living.

I was told that originally there was a spring on the creek bank some 100 yards from the homestead house which provided fresh water. The creek also provided water for the livestock, but in later years it dried up most summers.

The family worked hard, living off the land and was able to prove up on the homestead. There also was a lot of help from the neighboring homesteaders. Many homesteaders in the area failed. Obviously there was no electricity until the 1950's. The closest store and mail service was in the small community of Musselshell. I have little knowledge of the schooling situation. Country, one room type schools were later started throughout the area. A grade school & high school operated in Musselshell. My mother graduated from Billings High School in 1922. She lived with the Clark family in Billings while in school there. She later taught in the Shovel Creek Country School, which was located about a mile east of the homestead.

Aunt Helen died in 1923 and her two boys, Robert & Keith were taken in and raised by their grand parents on the homestead. Their father had previously died. As a result, these two nephews became more like younger brothers to my mother.

There was a cave under some rocks at the upper end of a coulee less than a half mile from the homestead house that was used by a pack of wolves. I never heard of them having any problem with the wolves killing any of their livestock, which is interesting. Apparently the wolves and the ranchers coexisted without any conflicts. Years later, Robert told me that he and Keith would crawl into the wolf den in the spring and count the number of pups and scratch their findings on the rock outside the den. One would think that mother wolf wouldn't put up with such human interference. This further proves that they & the wolves got along quite well. I wonder if any of the markings they made on the rock are still visible. That coulee was called "Wolf Den Coulee" and the location of the first sod grandpa plowed up.

Grandmother always milked the 1 or 2 milk cows that they kept. To restrain them while she milked, she would tie them to the corral fence with a single rope around their neck. Later all she had to do was place a rope around their necks wherever they might be and they would stand still while she milked them as if they were securely tied up. My mother became convinced that cow milking was not women's work and she swore that she would never learn to milk a cow, and she never did. She would help take care of the milk, but not the milking.

About this same time, my father, Allan, came to the Musselshell country to farm his sister's (Myrtle) place while they tried life elsewhere for a few years. That property was about 3 miles north of grandpa's homestead. Why, how or when Uncle Tom & Auntie came to Musselshell I do not know. The Galbraith family came to Montana from Minnesota. Dad's other sister (May) also located in Montana and farmed in the same area. My father's brother (William (Wille)) also came to Montana and settled in the Whitefish area. Another brother, Harry, located in California. I know little about him other than he was an accomplished musician. Played the trumpet.

Dad had been in the Army during the First World War and afterwards spent some time in Nebraska before coming to Montana. He was the proud owner of a red Model T that had a self starter which he had installed himself. He used that car until about 1927. Mother learned to drive using that car. This is how my folks became acquainted. I have no knowledge of their marriage; however, they first lived on, and farmed the "Baker Place" which was about one mile south of the Jensen farm. While living there, my brother, Allan Jr. was born. He died of Spinal Meningitis at the age of 18 months. About the time my sister, Gloria was born in 1927, the family moved to the "Hodeley Place" one mile west of my grandparent's place, upstream on the same creek. I was born in 1930 and we remained there until February of 1936 when we moved to Rathdrum, Idaho

In the early 1930's, my paternal grand parents, James & Margaret (Maggie) came to Montana and lived with Aunt Myrtle & Uncle Tom the remainder of their lives (mid 1930's). Tom and Myrtle stayed on their ranch until the late 1940's when they sold out and moved to Billings. Aunt May and family moved from Musselshell to Whitefish, Montana in the mid 1930's. Clayton, Robert and Keith moved to Billings and were driving tanker trucks.

I do have some recollection of living on the Hodeley Place and/or was told a lot about the place. The house on the Hodeley Place was a two room log structure to which a single room frame structure had been added later. No electricity or running water. Water came from a well some 100 feet from the house. The house was heated by wood burning stoves. Locally mined coal was available, but was expensive and rarely used. Refrigeration was provided by an icebox, which had to be filled with ice and the melt water dumped daily. Out buildings included a shop, a horse barn, a cow barn, a machine shed, an underground cellar, a large bunkhouse and naturally, an outhouse. Most of these are self explanatory, but the bunkhouse was an important multi-use facility. It housed mother's washing machine (an aluminum square tub Maytag wringer type powered by the infamous Maytag gas engine, which Mother could rarely start), clothes lines (for winter use), a cook stove for space heating and for heating washer water, extra bunks for hired help, extra storage space and the gasoline powered well pump. All the neighbors were jealous of her "state of the art" washer. For clothes washing, the water had to be heated on the stove in "boilers" (oblong deep tubs that fit over the entire fire box of the stove) and then transferred to the washer and rinse tubs. The washing of clothes was an all day job. The water well was located just outside of the bunkhouse.

Bathing was similar to clothes washing. Water was heated the same way either in the bunkhouse or in the kitchen. The round washer rinse tubs were used for bath tubs and usually more than one person used the same bathwater. Baths were not taken to often – not the luxury as today..

Water for use in the house was carried from the well in buckets. Hot water was obtained from either the tea kettle on the stove or the reservoir, which was part of the cook stove located next to the oven opposite the fire box. Used water was dumped out the door on the ground.

The single bedroom in the house had space for two double beds. One for the folks and one for us kids.

Mother had a treadle Singer sewing machine which was used extensively to make and mend clothes. Most clothing was obtained by mail order from Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Wards.

We did have a radio. It was powered by 6 volt car batteries. A battery charger was a part of the gas powered well pump, so when we were pumping water for the stock, the batteries were being charged. The radio battery had to be changed and recharged every few days. A lot of the neighbors had wind chargers (small fast turning windmill) to power their radios. I remember listening to KGHL out of Billings

Ice for the ice box was obtained in the winter from frozen ponds further down the creek. Cut into blocks with hand ice saws, hauled to the ice house and covered with sawdust. The ice house was a frame building heavily insulated with sawdust. Putting up ice was heavy, cold work and was usually accomplished together with several neighbors. I remember one time when one of the wagons hauling ice tipped enough in route that all the ice slid out on the ground in broken chunks.

My parents worked hard. Dad apparently was a good farmer and was looked up to by most of the neighbors. In 1927 he bought a new steel wheeled 15-30 McCormick Deering tractor and by that time had acquired a full line of farming equipment, including a threshing machine – the only tractor and thresher in the area. Until then, all field work, transport and hauling was done with horses. He had a team of gray mares and a team of mules. Both teams came with the farm. He was very proud of the mules, named Topsy & Beck and they were used for all the 2-horse work. The grays were used only when 4 head were needed or if a second driver was available. There are a lot of interesting stories about those mules but I won't take the time or space to include them here. A lot of the neighboring farmers were just getting by (including ourselves) and everyone shared manpower, equipment and knowledge. Having the only thresher & tractor in the area, dad was the focal point when threshing time came. All the local farmers got together, formed the threshing crew and assembled the other necessary equipment. They moved from farm to farm threshing everyone's grain (mostly winter wheat). Each farmer's wife was expected to feed the entire crew, usually the three main meals and a mid morning and mid afternoon snack each day. The women folks were in strong competition with each other, for if the food wasn't up to expectations (both by quality and quantity), the men were reluctant to thresh that farmer's grain the next year. The ladies did, though, help each other a great deal. How the threshing was done before dad got the tractor, I don't know. Perhaps using steam tractors. Each farmer cut his own grain using horse drawn binders or headers. The threshed grain was stored on each farm in until it could be hauled to market (usually to the elevator in Musselshell).

Firewood cutting was also a community effort. Each of the neighbors would harvest trees on their own property and pile up the logs. They would later assemble and with dad's tractor and buzz saw, moving from farm to farm, cut the heavy logs into blocks which could be individually man handled.

An interesting neighborhood innovation was to rig up a telephone system. The top wire of the barbed wire fence was used as the phone line. A jumper line over each gate had to be installed so the phone would work when a gate was open. A big problem was that each splice on the fence wire had to be cleaned of rust so electric current could flow. Many times a storm would render it necessary to locate and repair and clean defective splices. The fence staple had to be removed from each post, the wire wrapped with rubber (inner tube material) then the staple reinstalled. It was a true "party" line. Everyone had their special rings (a combination of longs & shorts). I don't remember how many of the neighbors were hooked up. My dad always said that the most advantageous thing about the phone system was that when the phone didn't work, the fence might be down and the cows out. I do remember talking to my grandmother on the phone.

Our farming operations included the raising of a few milk cows, range cattle, pigs, chickens, vegetables, grain (mostly winter wheat, but some oats and one year tried flax) and a little hay. The milk cows were given the best pasture and fed hay in the winter. The range cattle lived off the land and fended for themselves year around and became rather wild. Some didn't survive

tough winters. Some of the range cows had “bobbed” tails and “cropped” ears resulting from the freezing of their tails and ears when they were little calves.

Grain, cattle and hogs were our main cash crops; however we did sell some eggs, chickens and cream. A good share of the grain was used to feed the livestock.

We raised most of our food and preserving it for year around use was a major project. We did eat quite well too. Garden vegetables such as potatoes, carrots, squash and cabbage were stored in the root cellar where they wouldn't freeze and stored for winter use. Other crops like corn, beans and tomatoes had to be canned. Meat (both beef & pork) also had to be canned. Remember, we had no freezers and refrigerators in those days. Butchering was usually done in the late fall when it was relatively cool and the meat could be kept fresh for a short while. When vegetables became ripe and butchering was done, it was can, can, can, can. That was mother's job. She had a small pressure cooker that held only 4 quarts or 5 pints so it took a lot of pressure cooker cycles on a wood fueled stove to can all that food. She was still using that same pressure cooker at the time we quit farming (1945). The fat from a butchered pig was rendered into lard for use as shorting in baking (no Crisco then). Chickens were butchered as needed year around. The chickens didn't lay eggs to well in the winter, but we did have a way of preserving eggs in a 5 gallon crock and covering them with Water Glass.

1933 must have been a good year, for dad bought both a new De Soto car (I recall that he traded 4 or 5 steers for the car) and a new International truck. The truck, along with his tractor and threshing machine, put him a big step ahead of most of the neighbors, who were still using horses and wagons. Hauling grain 13 miles to the elevator in Musselshell was slow with teams and wagons. I recall, that with his truck, he could make 4 round trips in a single day carrying 90 bushels each load. The elevator had a hoist to raise the front end of truck and dump the grain, but it had to be shoveled from the granary to the truck by hand.

Mother joined the Order of Eastern Star and dad joined the Masons. Mother was Worthy Matron of Peace Chapter in 1929 and dad was Master of Victory Lodge # 124 in 1935. The Masons & the Star met the same night, taking turns using the same rented lodge hall in Musselshell. The meeting night usually included at least one Pot Luck meal. Kids were included and we spent most of the night bedded down in closets, covered with coats & car robes to keep warm. Lodge nights were quite the social event and went on until the wee hours. Dad often joked that they were lucky to get home in time to do the morning milking.

Dad was quite the baseball fan. A local baseball team was organized called The Musselshell Stubble Jumpers and I think that dad was the catcher. During one game, while batting, he was hit on the left forearm by a pitched ball breaking the arm. That ended his baseball career. With his arm in a sling, it was difficult for him to carry out the necessary farming activities. He had quite a time milking the cows with only one arm.

Gloria and I of course had jobs to do. We did help in the house and the garden. Because of our young age, I think our main responsibility was to stay out of the way.

Schooling was a problem. By the time Gloria became school age, the country schools had closed and all the kids had to go to Musselshell for school. There was no school bus system. The mothers & kids of many families moved and stayed in town week days, returning home weekends. The fathers stayed on the farm batching and tending to the livestock. My parents didn't like that kind of arrangement. My mother started "home schooling" Gloria when she was 6 years old and continued until we moved to Idaho.

There were several reasons promoting the desire to relocate. The school situation was one. Remoteness, no mail route, no electricity, cold winters and dry summers were some of the other reasons. I am of the firm opinion that due to the harsh weather and crude living conditions, my mother was never very happy in Montana and had no fond memories. Just mention the word "Montana" and she would quiver and shiver. I think that she made only 5 trips back to visit during the remainder of her life and yet had family still living there that out lived her.

All the roads in the area were dirt, not gravel. Many were nothing but two bare tracks with weeds growing in between. The local earth was a sort of clay. When dry it was hard, but when wet it became very slippery and sticky, called gumbo. Slide offs were common. The wet dirt would stick to the tires and roll up and plug the entire wheel fenders and when it dried, it became like concrete. Travel was not recommended when it rained. I recall one time that dad slid off the road on the way to town with a load of grain, tipping the loaded truck up against the bank and spilling some of the wheat and covering the side of the truck with gooey mud. No damage to the truck.

In 1934 & 5, dad started seriously to look for farm land in different locations. He traveled to several areas, which included the Flathead area, Ellensburg, Washington and Northern Idaho. He had little success until he looked at a 541 acre farm a couple miles north of Rathdrum, Idaho. The most inspiring thing about this place was that there were several free flowing springs of fresh, cold mountain water, some producing large quantities of water. About one half of the acreage was farmland the remainder was timber and brush. It was located ½ mile from a paved highway on which both a mail and school bus routes operated. There was a frame house with running water and a full basement but no electricity. Also there were about 15 other out buildings including two huge hay barns. What more could he ask for? This surely was considered an upgrade from the Montana situation. He signed up.

Preparations for moving were the next order of business. It was planned to take all the farm equipment and household furniture, but no livestock. The farm machinery was disassembled and along with some of the larger household items loaded on two flat bed semi trucks. The only item not taken was dad's threshing machine (more than likely because of its size). Our car and truck were loaded to capacity. When the semi's arrived in Billings, it was found that the spring load limits would not allow them to proceed due to their weight. The entire semi cargo was

transferred to a single rail car and dispatched to Rathdrum. Rathdrum was located on the main line of the Northern Pacific Railroad, which made the routing rather simple. The move took place in February, 1936. Gloria was 8 and I was 5 years old at the time.

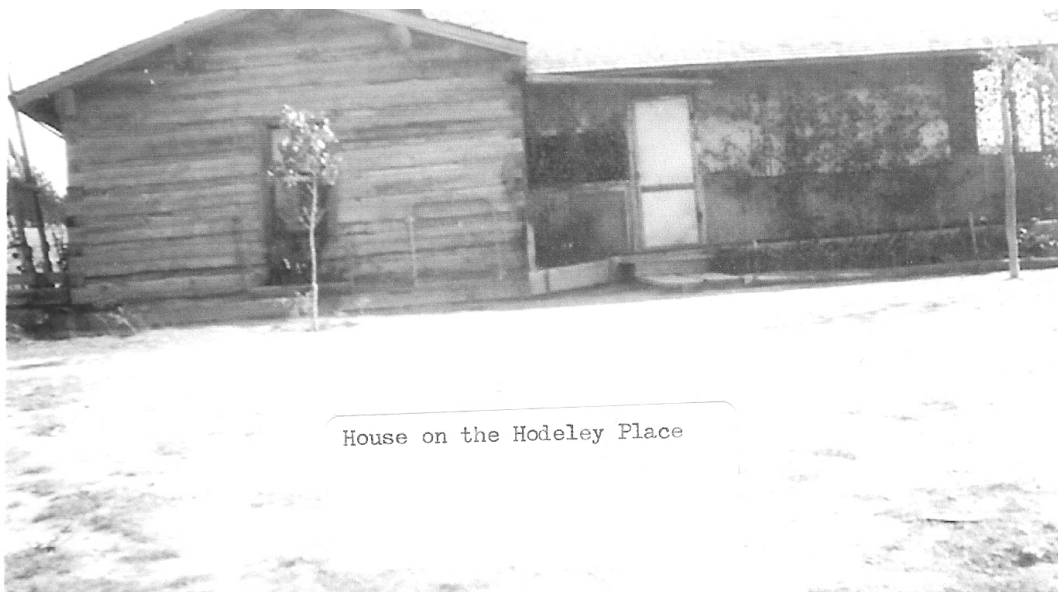
Mother drove the car and dad drove the truck. Us kids switched off riding with one or the other. The trip took 3 days. When we drove up the hill into Rathdrum, upon our arrival, the train was just dropping off our rail car. We were in Idaho.

During the summer of 1936 the grasshopper infestation in the Musselshell country was the worst ever. They ate every stock of grain and grass, ate pine needles off the trees, killing some trees, and even gnawed on the wooden fence posts. It was a good thing that we were gone. Dad still had crop in Montana to be harvested that summer, but lost it all to the grasshoppers.

The only family left in Musselshell at that time were, Auntie and Uncle Tom and my maternal grandparents. Grandmother Jensen died unexpectedly in 1942. This left Grandpa alone on the homestead. At about that time Clayton returned to Musselshell, purchased 2 sections of ground adjacent to the homestead and farmed them and the homestead until his death, after which, all the Jensen property was sold.

The only ties I have to Musselshell now (2012), is the cemetery, which is located a couple miles south of town. Family members interred there include: both sets of grandparents, brother (Allan Jr.), Uncle Clayton & Aunt Billie, Robert and Robert's father. My father is buried in the Little Bighorn National Cemetery, Gloria is buried in Portland Oregon and Mother's ashes are scattered on the old Rathdrum ranch.

Attached are a couple of 1930 photos and copies of current GPS maps.



House on the Hodeley Place

1915. 12. 10



Grain harvest using a  
Header and Dad's Gray  
Mares and Mules







Clayton's Home  
Homestead House location



Hodeley Place (today)  
Rock where dad stored his  
thresher  
Our House Location

