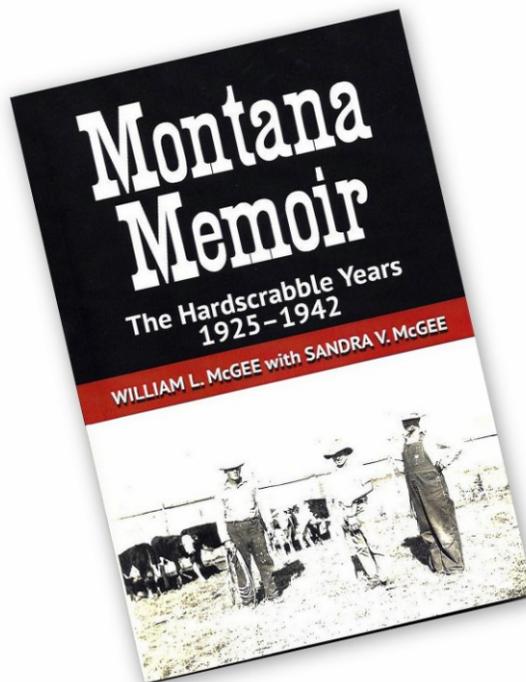


SAMPLE CHAPTER

Montana Memoir

The Hardscrabble Years, 1925-1942

by William L. McGee
with Sandra V. McGee



FARMED OUT

On October 29, 1929, Black Tuesday, the Wall Street stock market crashed. The United States was about to enter into its worst economic crisis to date—the Great Depression. Banks closed. Businesses and factories shut down. People lost their jobs, their savings, their senses of self worth. President Herbert Hoover dug in his heels and refused to allow the government to step in with any relief programs to help the jobless, the homeless, and the hungry. To him, that was Socialism or Communism. Soon, days were spent standing in long unemployment and soup lines. The economy became paralyzed. Official numbers said 25 percent of the work force was unemployed. (Years later, historians put the number closer to 45 percent.)

The Great Depression was a devastating blow to Malta. Though the town and country folk were used to hard times, things went from bad to worse. The price of livestock and grain fell until it didn't even pay to ship a carload of cattle or a wagonload of wheat to market. As if that wasn't bad enough, another drought hit the area in 1930, which caused more drylanders to desert their farms and homesteader shacks.

Like the economy, my parents' marriage went from bad to worse. I don't remember them fighting; on the other hand, I don't remember them being affectionate. In 1930, they separated.

Shortly after the separation, I saw Dad drive by our house. I took off running down the street after him, shouting, "Dad, stop. It's me, Billy." But he kept on driving. Maybe he didn't see or hear me, but to a five-year old, the message was, "there goes my dad and he doesn't want to see me." That hurt. Sometimes a friend would tell me, "Billy, your dad's in town. My dad just saw him." I'd rush over to the Pastime saloon or the Great Northern bar and stick my head in, hoping to see him.

Growing up in a small town like Malta, during the hardscrabble years of the not-so Great Depression, was tough enough. Growing up without a father to lend his support, emotionally and financially, was even tougher.

As it does for many a young kid, my life changed after my parents separated.

On a Sunday afternoon in the spring of 1932, I was sitting on our front porch after church. Carl and Luella Holm, friends from the Malta Community Church, drove up in their old Model T Ford. "Billy, how would you like to come out and spend the summer with us on our ranch?" said Mrs. Holm, sweetly.

I didn't need time to think about it. I liked the idea of being on a ranch, working with horses and cattle. And even at the age of seven, I had the smarts to know being "farmed out" (as it was called) to work for my room and board meant one less mouth at home for Mother to feed. And I could put it away. On Thursdays, when Mother baked bread and cinnamon rolls, I could down a half loaf of bread, fresh out of

the oven, slathered with butter and homemade jam, or two of her delicious, hot cinnamon rolls—all in one sitting.

I don't know whose idea it was to farm me out. After Mother and Dad separated, she said I was her man of the house. Bobby was only a year younger, but we all treated him like the baby of the family. What would Mother do if I left? But the matter had been settled by the adults. I packed a cardboard box with my few belongings, said goodbye to my family, and climbed into the Holms' Model T. Mother looked worried, Doris and Betty cried, Bobby looked concerned that he might be the next to go, but I put up a brave front and assured everyone I would be just fine. Depression-era kids grew up fast.

It took the better part of an hour to drive the 20 miles to the Holm ranch in the Bennett Lake community, some 20 miles south of Malta. The gravel road was rough and full of ruts from the snow melt and spring rains. Mr. Holm told me about himself on the drive. He was born in Oslo, Norway. In 1910, at age 24, he and his friend, Harold Christofferson, decided to come to America. They had seen the Great Northern advertisements with their glowing promise of free land to any homesteader not afraid of work. As Scandinavians, Carl and Harold were used to cold and long winters. When they arrived in America, they worked as farm hands in Minnesota and North Dakota. Then Mr. Holm went farther west to Montana and signed on with one of the big cow outfits. In 1912, he filed for a homestead in the Bennett Lake community. There never was a lake in the community. In the spring, when the snow melted, a large area of flat land was covered by water a few inches deep and it looked like a lake.

Carl Holm proved up his claim. Then he bought several hundred acres more of nearby land at under \$10 an acre when a discouraged homesteader gave up and left. He wrote to his friend, Harold, to join him, which Harold did. In 1926, Carl married Luella Peterson, a school teacher from Minnesota. Their nearest neighbors, who lived two miles away, were Harold and his wife, Ovedia. The Holms never had children of their own. The Christoffersons would have six: Elida, Randolph, Harriet, Junette, Artt, and Arve.

When we arrived at the Holm ranch, my first impression of the tarpaper shack I would call home for the next five months was downright depressing, even to a seven-year old. It was built on a hill overlooking a barn and other ranch buildings. Mr. Holm had added two rooms and a porch, but it was still a tarpaper shack. It goes without saying, there were no utilities: no indoor plumbing, no gas, no electricity, and no telephone.

Carl—Mr. Holm had asked me to call him by his first name—saw the disappointment on my face. "Come on, Billy, I have something to show you down at the barn," he said. He introduced me to a little brown and white pinto named Paint. "He's yours for the summer." I forgot about the tarpaper shack and its lack of conveniences.

My first two weeks on the ranch were one new experience after another. Carl showed me how to round up the work horses, feed and harness them, and hook them up to the farm machinery. Not that I would be allowed to do this by myself at age seven, but I was learning for the future.

Carl was from the old school and farmed with horses even after many of his neighbors got tractors. He preferred to think of himself as a cow man who only farmed for diversification. He ran about 200 head of mother cows and their calves, mostly on government Grazing Association land down on Beaver Creek. Like my dad, Carl was a top hand at gentle breaking both saddle horses and work horses. He always had a

“green” bronc in training whenever he was plowing or doing other heavy work. This kind of work could sap the nervous energy out of even a snaky three-year old bronc.

I could tell Luella was looking to me to take some chores off of her hands. Thus I learned how to feed the cows, the chickens and the hogs; how to separate milk, churn cream into butter, and gather eggs; and gather cow chips and weed her garden. I learned how to cut the heads off of spring chickens and pluck their feathers. I held a chicken by its legs with my left hand, and chopped off its head with an ax held in my right hand. I observed firsthand where the expression came from—“running around like a chicken with its head cut off.” Luella’s list of chores for me seemed endless. I didn't mind so much, except they took me away from time with Carl and learning a man's work. Carl was becoming my surrogate father.

It didn't get dark until around eight and Carl and I worked from dawn 'til dusk almost every day. We took two Saturdays off a month. We drove to the Malta Mercantile Company in town and bartered our farm products, such as eggs, butter and cream, for staples like flour, sugar, coffee, and beans. Cash rarely changed hands.

After our first trip to town, when we got back to the ranch, Carl showed me how to jack up the Model T, remove the four wheels, and take them down to the dam to soak in shallow water. The spokes were made of wood and during the hot summer days, the spokes would shrink. It was considered dangerous to drive on wheels with loose spokes.

On Sunday mornings, Carl, Luella and I went to the Lutheran Brethren Church, a little church open only in the summers and only if a visiting minister had been secured for the season. I remember Reverend C. J. Brun, a visiting minister from Brooklyn, New York. I don't remember anything about his preaching, but I remember his daughter. She was my age and my first crush.

The farmers and ranchers who attended the Lutheran church were mostly Scandinavian with names like Christofferson, Lodmell, Edgren, Bergsagel, Munger, Mikkelson, Erdahl, Mangis, Meisdalen and Wekander. Sometimes the sermons were in Norwegian ("paa Norsk") or in Swedish. After the service, there was likely to be a potluck social with down-home cooking, homemade ice cream and cake. It was my job to churn the ice cream. This was about the only time we saw our neighbors and there was always a lot of catching up to do. These potlucks ended by four in the afternoon because everyone had cows to milk.

I was familiar with living without all of the basic utilities, but during my first summer on the Holm ranch, I learned a few more ways to get along without them:

- Water was hauled from a spring about two miles away with a team of horses and a wagon.
- Cow chips (also known as cow pies and prairie chips) were collected from the pastures and burned as fuel in the kitchen stove. (For the benefit of city folk, cow chips were dried cow manure. When the manure dropped from a cow onto the grass, it was soft and dried into a round shape the size of a pie plate. Cow chips became like dried grass. When lit in the stove, they did not smell, lest what you may be thinking.)
- Abandoned homesteader shacks were torn down and used for firewood.
- Kerosene lamps were used to light the house; lanterns were used to light the barn.

- To listen to the radio, the battery in the Model T was disconnected and hooked up to a small radio on a table near the kitchen. Listening was limited to 30 minutes a day to preserve the battery.

- During the warm weather, baths were taken in the nearby dam, which was also the drinking water for the livestock. In the winter, water was heated in a big boiler on the kitchen stove and baths were taken in a washtub in front of the stove. Baths were taken once a week, needed or not.

- A wire could be strung to hook up to a telephone party line, if a farmer or rancher could afford it.

- And an outhouse wasn't so bad once you got used to it, except in the winter.

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