

"We'll be in it inside of six months," was one school of thought when Europe went to war in September of 1939, and the other refrain ran, "It's their own scrap over there, we can just keep our nose out this time." But as ever, history has had its own say and in a way not foretold--at Pearl Harbor last Sunday, in the flaming message of the Jap bombs.

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner

Dec. 11, 1941

All the people of that English Creek summer of 1939 — they stay on in me even though so many of them are gone from life. You know how when you open a new book for the first time, its pages linger against each other, pull apart with a reluctant little separating sound. They never quite do that again, the linger or the tiny sound. Maybe it can be said that for me, that fourteenth summer of my existence was the new book and its fresh pages. My memories of those people and times and what became of them, those are the lasting lines within

the book, there to be looked on again and again, whenever the mood of wonder asks to.

My mother was the earliest of us to get word of Pearl Harbor on that first Sunday of December, 1941. The phone rang, she answered it, and upon learning that the call was from Two Medicine National Forest headquarters in Great Falls she began to set them straight on the day of the week. When told the news from Hawaii she went silent and held the receiver out for my father to take.

In a sense Alec already had gone to the war by then. At least he was gone, with the war as a kind of excuse. For when the fighting started in Europe and the prospect for cattle prices skyrocketed, Wendell Williamson loaded up on cattle. Wendell asked Alec to switch to the Deuce W, his ranch down in the Highwood Mountains, as a top hand there during this build-up of the herd. Just after shipping time, mid-September of 1939, Alec went. It may come as no vast surprise that he and Leona had unraveled by then. She had chosen to start her last year of high school, Alec was smarting over her decision to go that way instead of to the altar, and my belief is that he grabbed the Deuce W job as a way to put distance between him and that disappointment.

I saw Leona the day of the Gros Ventre centennial, several years ago now. She is married to a man named Wright and they run a purebred Hereford ranch down in the Crazy Mountains country. The beauty still

have a hard time forgiving life for that.

Ray Heaney and I went together to the induction station in Missoula in September of 1942, about a week after my eighteenth birthday. And we saw each other during basic training at Fort Lewis out in Washington. In the war itself, though, we went separate ways. Ray spent a couple of years of fighting as a rifleman in Italy and somehow came through it all. These days Ray has an insurance agency over in Idaho, at Coeur d'Alene, and we keep in touch by Christmas card.

I wound up in a theater of World War Two that most people don't even know existed, the Aleutians campaign away to hell and gone out in the northern Pacific Ocean off Alaska. Those Aleutian islands made me downgrade the wind of the Two country. There is not a lot else worth telling in my warrior career, for early in our attack on Cold Mountain I was one of those ~~we~~ ^{who} got an Attu tattoo--a Jap bullet in my left leg, breaking the big bone not far above the ankle. Even yet on chilly days, I am reminded down there.

When the Army eventually turned me loose into civilian life I used my G.I. bill to study forestry at the university in Missoula. Each of those college summers I worked as a smokejumper for the Forest Service, parachuting out of more airplanes onto more damn forest fires than now seems sane to me. And in the last of those smokejumping summers I began going with a classmate of mine at the university, a young woman from there in the Bitterroot country. The

shines out of Leona. Ranch work and the riding she does have kept her in shape, I couldn't help noticing. But one thing did startle me. Leona's hair now is silvery as frost.

She smiled at my surprise and said: "Gold to silver, Jick. You've seen time cut my value."

Left to my own devices, I would not tell any further about Alec. Yet my brother, his decisions, the consequences life dealt him, always are under that summer and its aftermath like the paper on which a calendar is printed.

Before he enlisted in the Army the week after Pearl Harbor, Alec did come back to Gros Ventre to see our parents. Whether re-conciliation is the right amount of word for that visit I don't really know, for I was on a basketball trip to Browning and a ground blizzard kept those of us of the Gros Ventre team there overnight. So by the time I got back, Alec had been and gone. And that last departure of his from English Creek led to a desert in Tunisia. How stark it sounds; yet it is as much as we ever knew. A Stuka finding that bivouac at dusk, swooping in and splattering 20-millimeter shells. Of the cluster of soldiers who were around a jerry can drawing their water rations, only one man lived through the strafing. He was not Alec.

So. My last words with my brother were those on the telephone when I tried to talk him into going to the Flume Gulch fire. I do

day after graduation in 1949, we were married. That marriage lasted just a year and a half, and it is not something I care to dwell on.

That same graduation summer I took and passed the Forest Service exam and was assigned onto the Custer National Forest over in eastern Montana. I suppose one of the Mazoola desk jockeys thought it scrupulous, or found it in some regulation, that most of the state of Montana should be put between me and my father on the Two. But all that eastern Montana stint accomplished--hell, even the name got me down, that dodo Custer--was to cock me into readiness to shoot out of the Forest Service when the chance came.

Pete Reese provided the click. As soon as his lambs were shipped in the fall of 1952 Pete offered me a first crack at the Noon Creek ranch. Marie's health was giving out--she lived only a few more years, dark lovely doe she was--and Pete wanted to seize an opportunity to buy a sheep outfit down in the Gallatin Valley near Bozeman, where the winters might not be quite so ungodly. I remember every exact word from Pete in that telephone call: "You're only an accidental nephew, but I suppose maybe I can give you honorary son-in-law terms to buy the place."

I took Pete up on his offer and came back to the Two Medicine country so fast I left a tunnel in the air.

On the 21st of March of 1953--we kidded that going through a lambing time together would tell us in a hurry whether we could stand each other the rest of our lives--Marcella Withrow and I were married.

Her first marriage, to a young dentist at Conrad, had not panned out either, and she had come back over to Gros Ventre when the job of librarian opened up. That first winter of mine on the Reese place I resorted to the library a lot, and it began to dawn on me that books were not the only attraction. I like to think Marce and I are both tuned to an echo of Dode: "Life is wide, there's room to take a new run at it."

In any event, Marce and I seem to have gotten divorce out of our systems with those early wrong guesses, and we have produced two daughters, one married to a fish-and-game man up at Sitka in Alaska, the other living at Missoula where she and her husband both work for the newspaper. We also seem to be here on Noon Creek to stay, for as every generation ends up doing on this ranch we have lately built a new house. Four such domiciles by now, if you count the Ramsay homestead where I was born. It cost a junior fortune in double-glazing and insulation, but we have windows to the mountains all along the west wall of this place. These September mornings when I sit here early at the kitchen table and watch dawn come to the skyline of the Two, coffee forgotten and cold in my cup, the view is worth any price.

The thirty-plus years of ranching that Marce and I have put in here on Noon Creek have not been easy. Tell me what is. But so far the pair of us have withstood coyotes and synthetic fabrics and Two country winters and the decline of sheepherders to persevere in the sheep business--although we have lately diversified into some

Charolais cattle and several fields of that new sanfoin alfalfa.

I am never going to be red-hot about being a landlord to cows. And the problem of finding decent hay hands these days makes me positively pine for Wisdom Johnson and Bud Dolson and Perry Fox. But Marce and I are agreed that we will try whatever we have to, in order to hang on to this land. I suppose even dude ranching, though I hope to Christ it never quite comes to that.

Along English Creek, the main change to me whenever I go over there is that sheep are damn few now. Cattle, a lot of new farming; those are what came up on the next spin of the agricultural roulette wheel. About half the families--Hahns, Frews, Roziers, another generation of Busby brothers--still retain the ranches their parents brought through the Depression. The Van Bebber ranch is owned by a North Dakotan named Florin, and he rams around the place in the same slambang fashion Ed did. Maybe there is something in the water there.

And Dode Withrow's place is run by one of Dode's other son-in-laws, Bea's husband Merle Torrance. Dode though is still going strong, the old boy. Weathered as a stump, but whenever I see that father-in-law of mine he is the original Dode: "What do you know for sure, Jick? people
Have they found a cure yet for ~~those of us~~ in the sonofabitching sheep business?"

Anyway, except for big aluminum sheds and irrigation sprinklers slinging water over the fields, you would not find the ranches of

English Creek so different from the way they were.

The Double W now is owned by a company called TriGram Resources, which bought it from the California heirs after Wendell Williamson's death. As a goddamn tax write-off, need I say.

How can it be twenty years since my father retired from the Forest Service? Yet it is.

After this summer I have told about, the next year was awful on him, what with Alec gone from us to the Deuce W and the decision from Mazoola in the winter of 1939 to move my father's district office from English Creek into Gros Ventre. Access realignment, they called it, and showed him on paper how having the ranger station in town would put him closer by paved road to the remote north portion of the Two. He kicked against it in every way he could think of; even wrote to the Regional Forester himself, the Major: "Since when is running a forest a matter of highway miles?" Before long, though, the war and its matters were on my father's mind and the mail was bringing Forest Service posters urging: LET'S DELIVER THE WOODS Sharpen your ax to down the Axis. # BSF

The way the water of a stream ripples around a rock, the Forest Service's flow of change went past my father. Major Kelley departed Missoula during the war, to California to head up the government project of growing guayule for artificial rubber. "I'd rather take a beating than admit it," my father confessed, "but I was kind of

getting used to those goddamn kelleygrams." The Two supervisor Ken Sipe was tapped for a wartime job at Forest Service headquarters in Washington, D.C., and stayed on back there. Their successors in Region One and the Two Medicine forest headquarters simply left my father in place, rangering the English Creek district. I have heard of a ranger out in the state of Washington who spent a longer career on a district, but my father's record wasn't far behind.

His first winter of retirement in Gros Ventre was a gloomy and restless time for him, although my mother and I could never tell for sure how much of that was retirement and how much just his usual winter. It was a relief to us all when spring perked him up. I had a call from him the morning of the first day of fishing season:

"Bet you a beer you've forgotten how to string ten fish on a willow."

"I can't get away," I had to tell him. "I've got ewes and lambs all over creation out here. You sure you wouldn't like to take up a career as a bunch herder?"

"Brook trout," he informed me, "are the only kind of herd that interests me. You're missing a free chance at a fishing lesson."

"I'll cash that offer on Sunday, okay? You can scout the holes for me today. I want Mom to witness your count when you get home, though. It's past time ~~I~~^{was} owed a beer, and it's beginning to dawn on me that your arithmetic could be the reason."

"That'll be the day," he rose to my joshing. "When I don't bring

home ten fish on a willow. As will be shown to you personally on Sunday."

When he hadn't returned by dusk of that day, my mother called me at the ranch and I then called Tom Helwig, the deputy sheriff. I drove across the divide to English Creek and just before full dark found my father's pickup parked beside the North Fork, on Walter Kyle's old place. Tom Helwig and I and the men from the English Creek ranches searched and searched, hollering in the dark, until giving up about midnight.

With first light of the next morning I was the one who came onto my father. His body, rather, stricken by a heart attack, away back in the brush atop a beaver dam he'd been fishing. Nine trout on the willow stringer at his side, the tenth still on the hook where my father had dropped his pole.

"Jick, the summer when Alec left. Could it have come out different? If your father and I hadn't kept at him, hadn't had **should** our notions of what he ~~could~~ do--would it all have been different?"

My mother brought this up in the first week after my father passed away. In a time like that, the past meets you wherever you turn. The days do not use their own hours and minutes, they find ones you have lived through with the person you are missing.

Only that once, though, in all the years from then to now, did she wonder that question aloud. The other incidents of the summer of 1939 we often talk over, when I stop by to see how she

is doing. She has stayed on in her own house in Gros Ventre. "I'm sufficient company for myself," this mother of mine maintains. She still grows the biggest vegetable garden in town and is perpetual president of the library board. What irks her is when people regard her, as she puts it, "as if I was Some Kind Of A Monument." I had to talk hard when her birthday came this February and the new young editor of the Gleaner wanted to interview her. Gros Ventre Woman 'Leaped In' with 20th Century was the headline. You know how those stories are, though. It is hard to fit such a life into mere inches of words.

father

I had never told her or my ~~fathe~~ of Alec's refusal, that noon when I phoned him about the Flume Gulch fire. And I did not when she asked could it, would it all have come out different?

But what I did say to her was the one truth I could see in that distant English Creek summer.

"If you two hadn't had the notions you did, you wouldn't have been yourselves. And if Alec hadn't gone his way, he wouldn't have been Alec."

She shook her head. "Maybe if it had been other times--"

"Maybe," I said.

And Stanley Meixell.

Stanley stayed on with the Busby brothers until their lambs were shipped that fall of 1939, then said he thought he'd go have a look at Oregon--"always did like that name." Early in the war the Busbys received word that he was working in a shipyard out there

(BF)

at Portland. After that, nothing.

So I am left with the last scene of Stanley after the Flume Gulch fire, before my father and I headed in to Gros Ventre. I went over to where Stanley was stirring a pot of gravy.

"Yes sir, Jick. Looks like this feedlot of ours is about to close down."

"Stanley," I heard myself saying, "all that about the Phantom Woman fire--I don't know who was right or wrong, or if anybody was, or what. But I'm sorry, about the way things turned out back then."

"A McCaskill who'll outright say the word sorry," replied Stanley. He tasted the gravy, then turned to me, his dark eyes steady within the weave of squint lines. "I was more right than I even knew, that time."

"What time was that?"

"When I told your folks you looked to me like the jick of the family."

