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Utopic or dystopic future Bozeman?

Things aren't like they used to be in Montana's iconic mountain town.

Greg Findley | **Aug. 21, 2019**

This fictional short story is part of our Speculative Journalism Issue (https://www.hcn.org/issues/51.14/), where we imagine stories from a West under climate stress in 2068.

DYSTOPIA

It's late February 2044, closing weekend at Bridger Bowl Ski Area, just 16 miles from Bozeman, Montana. Colter and Madison, 22-year-old twins from the nearby Gallatin Valley who grew up skiing here with their parents, have been stuck in the typical weekend morning crush of traffic for over an hour on their way up Bridger Canyon to get in one more day of skiing. Even though they aren't moving and rain is pounding their car, they're having a blast, singing and drumming along to the classics on *The Moose*, the radio station they listened to with their parents on their way to Bridger when they were kids.

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They're stoked to be going there again, and even with the rain in the canyon, they hope that it's snowing higher up, maybe on the Upper Mountain. It's been a good winter by current standards, especially compared to last year, when Bridger didn't open because rain kept washing away the scant and melting snow.

Since the Green New Deal was defeated, in Bozeman in 2020 and nationally in 2021, back when there was still a chance to stop runaway climate chaos, and since no other plans have been enacted, greenhouse gas emissions have continued to increase and temperatures have warmed rapidly in Montana and around the globe. It's been years since the planet surpassed the internationally agreed goal of limiting global warming to 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit (2 degrees Celsius). Bozeman's winters have warmed an average of 6 degrees Fahrenheit since 2019, snow melts off more than a month earlier, and the midwinter snowline keeps rising higher and higher. Summers are hotter and drier, with an additional 35 days above 90 degrees each summer.

Unfortunately, even this good snow year won't be enough to save Bridger Bowl, Bozeman's iconic community-owned ski area, which began operation in 1955. This weekend will see not only the end of the season, but the end of the ski area itself. Even as the Gallatin Valley's population has exploded to over 400,000 people, providing many more potential skiers, warmer weather and lost seasons have taken their toll on the nonprofit ski area's finances. Over the past decade, it has had to spend millions of dollars on snowmaking for the entire mountain, all the way to the Ridge. The ski area burned through even more cash to add shuttle buses to get people to and from mid-mountain, where the snowline is often located nowadays. Still, rain and warmer temperatures have shortened the ski season for the past two decades, and three of the past eight winters have been too warm for it to open for more than a few weeks at a time. Bridger is losing money fast, and there is no more cash. The future is only getting warmer. Bridger Bowl has no choice but to close for good.

Meanwhile, Big Sky Resort, Bozeman's other local mountain, was bought and privatized two years ago by the exclusive Yellowstone Club so its growing number of millionaire and billionaire members could have private access to the last remaining reliable winter snow in the area. The era of public skiing is coming to a close for the Gallatin Valley, just as it has elsewhere in Montana, with the loss of Snow Bowl, Red Lodge, Great Divide, Discovery, Maverick Mountain and Whitefish Mountain in the past few decades.

Madison and Colter know it wasn't always like this. They grew up listening to their parents' stories of the good life back in the early 21st century, when there was lots of open space and plentiful snow in the winter; summers were sunny and cool with only occasional fires, and days on the river meant peace and quiet and incredible trout fishing. In contrast, life for the twins has been a constant struggle. After high school, like all American 18-year-olds, they served two years of mandatory military service, Colter protecting the southern border from the millions of thirsty, starving and desperate Central American migrants escaping civil wars over arable land, while Madison fought in Iraq, keeping the last barrels of oil flowing to the U.S.

Since returning home, Madison has been working on a wildlife biology degree at Montana State University. She wants to help the few remaining Yellowstone grizzly bears adapt to the rapid changes caused by fires, reduced snowpack and the loss of staple foods, such as pine nuts from the now-extinct whitebark pine. She has to work full-time to cover her living expenses while completing her degree as quickly as possible; she needs to keep her debt low enough to have a chance to pay it off before she has to help her parents when they retire. Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid have all been robbed to pay for crumbling infrastructure and climate remediation, and to keep the military active in the increasing resource wars around the world. Taxes are high, given the hundreds of billions of dollars a year needed for climate-related disasters in the U.S., as well as the military presence required to prevent local skirmishes from growing into World War III. There will be no social safety net left for Madison and Colter's generation.

Colter had wanted to go to college, too, but after returning home it became obvious that his two years at the border, especially after he was ordered to fire on desperate mothers and children attempting to breach the wall, have left him suffering from PTSD that he can't afford to treat. He often can't sleep and finds himself turning to a homemade cocktail of whisky and narcotics; it dulls the pain when he slips into the darkness of depression.

As the valley's population explodes, Colter's carpenter skills make it easy to find work building houses, but wages are so low and living costs so high, that he bartends in the evenings just to make ends meet. Like most young people, he can afford only catastrophic health insurance, and since the VA no longer

has the budget to pay for his medical treatment and therapy, he needs cash when his symptoms become unbearable. Wages for blue-collar workers across the country have remained flat for decades, while CEOs and the top 1% have gotten even wealthier. Nearby, the exclusive Yellowstone Club is booming.

The sun still sets in future Bozeman.

Tim Evanson / via Wikimedia commons

Climate chaos has been hard on local farmers, but great for developers, changing the valley from agricultural land and open space to urban sprawl, with new roads crisscrossing it and new homes and subdivisions filling every possible space. Hot dry summers and more frequent droughts, fires and storms have forced many local family farms into bankruptcy, and their land has been gobbled up for subdivisions, as the area's relatively cool temperatures, accessible recreation, and available land have become extremely desirable for people forced to flee the heat of the Southwest and the flooding coastal areas of Miami, New York, and the Gulf of Mexico. Many of the newcomers are wealthy, at least by local standards, and they are thrilled to be able to afford gigantic homes on large private lots.

Madison and Colter, like most young people they know, share housing in one of the distant Bozeman suburbs. They live in a cheaply built, poorly insulated three-bedroom condo in the suburb of Three Forks with four friends, two to a room. Affordable housing, although always a concern in the area, just can't keep up with the growth; the average wage earner lives 30 miles or more from downtown.

To get anywhere, people need a car; the roads are too choked with traffic to be safe for biking or walking, and public transportation isn't much of an option because the city ignored the signs of climate-related runaway growth decades ago and now has no hope of catching up with the growing population's transportation needs. Area commutes average over an hour, up to twice that in rush hour. Many people work nontraditional hours to avoid the worst traffic jams.

Madison and Colter still love to fish and hike, although opportunities for both have changed since they were kids. Summer temperatures regularly hover over 90 degrees, and over-100 degree days are common now. Because forest fires have doubled in size and intensity the air is so smoky that it's usually unhealthy to go outside during July, August and September. All year-round river-access points and trailheads are overcrowded, and people end up crushing vegetation to park in fields; violent conflicts over parking spaces are common, as is theft from cars left in overcrowded parking areas.

In a good year, fishing season lasts March through June, although disease, drought, overfishing and warming waters have devastated trout populations. Invasive warm-water species have replaced trout altogether in the Yellowstone River, and the Madison River is still closed to fishing from the disease epidemic that killed 90% of the fish five years ago. Luckily, there are still trout to catch in the area, since the Yellowstone Club stocks the Upper Gallatin River every year for guests in private jets. Locals have a chance to catch the "ones that got away," but the river is usually so crowded it is hard to even cast.

The Hyalite Fire of July 2042 was so hot and fast that it devastated the entire Hyalite drainage, reducing the state's most popular recreation area to ash and sterilized soil. The winter of 2043's extra-heavy rains washed out the road and clogged Hyalite Creek with debris, flooding a number of homes at the mouth of the canyon and closing the area permanently. With this area no longer accessible, the number of available trailheads has decreased and people now drive hours just to get into the woods. Many days, the traffic, the crowds and the polluted skies are too much, and Madison and Colter just stay home.

All the growth has destroyed migration routes for elk and bison, decimating their populations so that they are now rarely seen in and around Yellowstone National Park. The park's famous wolves haven't been seen for years, and grizzly populations are dropping fast. But even though fires, invasive species and landscape changes from drought and of decreased snowfall have dramatically diminished the number and variety of species seen in Yellowstone National Park, the number of human visitors has increased. Bumper-to-bumper driving and multi-hour traffic jams are the norm from March through December, and the roads through the Paradise Valley and Gallatin Canyon are choked with cars every hour of the day. As the park changes, and as wildlife around the world becomes extinct, more and more people want to see the great wild animals before they completely disappear. Yellowstone, at least for a little while, is one of the last places in the world to do this.

Madison and Colter have often talked about leaving and moving somewhere better, but they have no idea where that might be. For all its problems, the Gallatin Valley is still better than almost anywhere else they can think of. Besides, the few places that still have enough snow for skiing are so expensive they couldn't even consider moving there. They both agree that they'll never have kids — it would be cruel to bring kids into a world of climate chaos, with civilizations crumbling and conflict and suffering everywhere. They are experiencing the end of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and the good life in Bozeman, and the beginning of something unthinkably worse.

They finally reach Bridger Bowl and walk through mud and pounding rain to the overcrowded Saddle Peak Lodge to wait, as they have many times before, to see if the Ski Patrol will somehow manage to get the snowpack safe enough to ski on. Finally, at 12:30, the announcement comes over the loudspeakers that it's raining all the way to the Ridge. There will be no skiing today, and in fact the rain has damaged the snowpack too much to open again this season. There is a pause while this sinks in, and then the crowd lets out a collective groan, more of resignation than of sadness, as people realize that the era of skiing in Bozeman is now over.

Madison and Colter are disappointed, too, but they aren't really surprised. They splurge on pints of a rare locally brewed beer and then push through the crowd to stand outside in the rain, not quite ready to leave Bridger Bowl for the last time. Silently they raise their glasses to the mountain to thank it for all the memories and joy it has brought them. Their eyes meet briefly, but then they quickly look away, reluctant to display the anger and fear they both feel, finding it easier to keep it alone inside them. They stare at their feet, unspeaking, as fury rises within them. How is it possible that their parents, and all the others of voting age back in 2019 and 2020, hadn't cared enough about their futures to vote for action on climate change while there was still a chance to do something? Instead, they said that change would be too expensive. They refused to believe that things would be that bad for their kids, so they just kept on building bigger houses and buying more and more imported cheap plastic stuff, searching for happiness. Now, climate tipping points have been crossed and feedback loops have been created that have pushed the climate into irrevocable chaos, and it's clear the happiness their ancestors sought was always right here, in nature. Now, even it is going away, and Madison and Colter can't do a thing about it.

From now on in the winter, they'll just have to spend more time surviving, burying their fear and sadness and anger in work and virtual reality games, like the new "VR Skiing." It won't be the same, but neither will anything else. "Cheers," they say in hollow ritual and then sip their beers, their minds already drifting to the next shift at work and the unpaid bills piling up at home. They'll get by, probably.

UTOPIA

It's early February in 2044, and it's one of those cold smoke-powder days at Bridger Bowl. Colter and Madison, 22-year-old twins, just hiked up to the Ridge, where they lifted their goggles to their helmets and fist-bumped at the view laid out before them — sparkling powder-caked trees and undeveloped open spaces everywhere they look. They've only got one run left because of Bridger's new Fair Powder rules, but they are stoked — snow doesn't get any lighter than this and they've already had three untracked, uncrowded runs.

Cold smoke days like this are increasingly rare now, as winters get warmer and heavy, wet snowfalls become more common. But at least skiing and powder still exist at Bridger Bowl, mainly because the Green New Deal was passed in 2021, the year the the twins were born and the year before their family moved to Bozeman from Colorado in search of a better life. Ever since the bill's passage, carbon emissions have fallen. Global warming has slowed down and will soon stop altogether.

A lift at Bridger Bowl in Bozeman, Montana.

nikrowell / CC via Flickr

So far, their lives have been stable and pleasant, beginning when their parents took advantage of a year of paid family leave to spend time with their newborns and move to Montana. Madison and Colter went to free pre-K childcare, which enabled their parents to work full-time and still have time and energy for their kids each day. Although their parents have never been wealthy, they found good careers as a solar installer and a nurse, both of which were unionized and guaranteed living wages. The family has never lacked anything they needed.

After high school, Madison and Colter had many choices for their required year of public service, from helping Bozeman upgrade city buildings to become hyper-efficient, to repairing and greening infrastructure, to addressing the maintenance backlog in Yellowstone or other national parks. Madison chose to spend the year in the new Youth Climate Corps, planting trees and restoring fire-, flood- and drought-damaged areas. Colter spent a year as a pre-K assistant teacher, working alongside the unionized, well-paid professionals who ran the program.

They both attended Montana State University, rather than technical college, even though both options were now free to all residents. Madison wanted to pursue a career as a biological engineer, working to create bio-remediation technologies to help the planet absorb CO2 and to stabilize the climate. Colter chose to become an elementary school teacher, now a well-paid and highly regarded career. He hoped to work job in Bozeman, where the public schools were among the best in the state and the nation. Now that schools were improving everywhere, however, he was open to the thought of teaching somewhere else in the state.

Neither needs to choose a career based on how much money they'll make. Instead, they can choose a job based on their interests, now that basic wages have increased while top pay has leveled off, creating a more equal society. They have no student debt to pay off and their health care is not tied to a job; it's now a guaranteed right for all, provided through a federal program. They also don't need to worry about taking care of their parents once their retire; Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid have all been strengthened and the safety net is strong.

Wherever they end up working, the twins will likely work no more than 35 hours a week, perhaps less; the economy has shifted from a focus on constant growth to a more circular arrangement inspired by happiness metrics. With less time spent working or commuting, they now have more time to spend with friends and family. They both have hobbies: Colter has joined a writer's group and Madison ties flies and fishes whenever possible; they camp and backcountry ski as much as possible.

Although Bozeman has continued to grow every year, mostly because many southern regions has become unbearably hot and dangerous, the growth has been smart and well-planned since the passage of Bozeman's own Green New Deal in 2020.

Traffic has almost been eliminated because the city now owns and operates a fleet of autonomous (self-driving) electric vans that provide free transportation throughout the city and neighboring areas. Residents use an app to arrange for timely pick -up and drop-off, making the vans incredibly convenient. A fleet of electric vans goes to Bridger Bowl all day long every day

in the winter, and to places like Hyalite and the Yellowstone and Madison Rivers in the summer, eliminating the need and expense of owning private cars for recreation.

UberLyft and other private companies still provide transportation for those who don't want to share a ride or who are going somewhere the public system doesn't go — to remote river-access points or hunting or backpacking trailheads. Without the need to store cars, newer homes have gear and storage rooms but not garages. Building costs are lower.

New neighborhoods (they are no longer called subdivisions) are built to be high-density and walkable, with ample shared parks and greenspaces for outdoor picnics and for kids to play or enjoy pick-up soccer games. Each neighborhood is designed around shopping, dining and bar options, with small branch libraries, community gardens, community meeting areas, and recreation and fitness facilities centrally located. All of the electricity for the neighborhoods is produced via community rooftop solar and wind turbines, and homes are heated and cooled with heat pumps, cutting living costs dramatically.

Taxes on new homes that surpass the minimum low-income family home size and footprint have created a housing trust fund which pays for rent-controlled low-income housing. This allows Madison and Colter to live in good-quality homes without overspending each month.

Hiking and biking trails are included in the plans for each new neighborhood and used both for recreation and for commuting to work.

Surrounding each neighborhood are small organic farms and open spaces where family-owned organic farms grow most of the food consumed locally. Each neighborhood has a local farmers market one night a week, so that all local farms have an opportunity to sell directly to customers. There is somewhere to buy locally produced food every day of the week.

These small farms are thriving, especially since federal and Montana agriculture policy has shifted to support family farms over corporate agriculture. Rather than subsidize farmers for not growing crops, subsidies now guarantee minimum prices for commodities and for growing organic food

to be sold locally at fair prices. Farmers also receive subsidies for capturing CO2 in the soil, as good agriculture has been recognized as a solution to the climate crisis. Additionally, guaranteed low interest loans have helped farmers put wind turbines and solar arrays on otherwise unusable pieces of land, such as the corners of circularly irrigated fields. For many of the farmers, the income they receive from energy generation is enough to provide a good baseline annual profit, minimizing the risk of bankruptcy in bad farming years, and allowing them to pay decent wages to their farmworkers.

When the twins want to go to Billings, Helena, Missoula, or farther, they can take the recently completed, convenient and affordable zero-carbon bullet trains, which have eliminated the need for most flights. Traffic at the Gallatin Field airport has been reduced so much that airport expansion stopped in 2030.

Sure, things aren't like they used to be, but the climate has finally stabilized. And with tree planting projects here and around the world, there is even hope of reducing atmospheric CO2 to lower global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius. Ski season is shorter and warmer, and fishing is closed in late summer due to low water and high temperatures, but Yellowstone and surrounding areas still have healthy forests and wildlife populations, and locals still live for outdoor recreation.

Bridger Bowl continues to be a model community-owned ski area, but in order to keep the skiing experience great for locals it has had to limit the number of non-residents skiing there. It's also implemented new policies to keep lift lines manageable and minimize conflicts over scarce untracked snow. Tiered ticket prices that charge out-of-towners more are designed to encourage non-residents to ski at nearby for-profit ski areas like Big Sky and the old Yellowstone Club, which has been recently opened to the public. Competition for untracked powder had become so out-of-control that in 2028, Bridger began its Fair Powder clause, staggering lift openings and fixing the number of powder runs each skier could get. Additional powder runs could be purchased, either through volunteering on climate remediation projects or by paying into a fund that covered the cost of these projects, but even these additional runs were capped to allow everyone a chance to ski powder. Many

old-timers complained when the policy was put in place, but most now grudgingly agree that the new system has cut down on stress and conflicts, making skiing more relaxing and fun again.

Rivers also now have user quotas in place, both for fishing and floating, but rather than random first-come, first-served policies, they allow access to all residents and visitors on a fair-use basis, with some sections designated as floating only, and others reserved for wade fishing or float fishing, among other regulations.

But even with these changes, Bozeman remains a wonderful place to live and raise a family, thanks to the foresight of the people in 2020 and 2021 who passed the local and national Green New Deals. Much has changed, but there is still much to love, and the future for Madison and Colter, and their as-yet unborn kids and grandkids, is bright.

Madison pulls her goggles down, taps her poles together twice in pre-run ritual and drops off the Ridge into the knee-deep powder. Although she quickly disappears into the white room, swallowed by sparkling powder, Colter easily follows her hoots of joy. They stop at the bottom of the Nose, laughing and trying to catch their breaths, and slap poles in a high five. What a run, what a place to live, what a life!

Then Madison pulls out her phone to arrange for a van ride back to town in time to check out the new publicly supported art show at the Emerson, and they race to the bottom of the hill, smiling all the way down.

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