Modes of Survival as Preservation and Practice at the Moon-Randolph Homestead

Gwendolyn R. Lockman

The Moon-Randolph Homestead site in Missoula, Montana is familiar with precarity. Indigenous people traversed the North Hills of Missoula via the Trail to the Buffalo before American settlement. They passed through nearby Hell Gate Canyon, named for the cold, rough waters of the river as it swept into the valley and for the ambushes between tribes that occurred at the canyon. Homesteaders in the Missoula valley tried to raise subsistence crops and livestock in the late nineteenth century. Theirs was a lifestyle without the potential for profit that large, thousand-plus acre ranches could enjoy. The City of Missoula acquired Bill Randolph’s land, now the Moon-Randolph Site, in 1997. The City assumed responsibility for 470 acres of mostly pasture, a dozen buildings made out of salvaged materials dating to the 1880s, and a century’s-worth of the Randolph family’s belongings. Tucked behind the Interstate, beyond the dump, and divided by foothills from nearby historic neighborhoods, the Moon-Randolph Homestead hides, steeling itself from the modern world but not quite stuck in the past.

This paper reflects on my work at the Moon-Randolph Homestead Site as a Curation and Interpretation Intern during Summer 2019. I discuss strategies for survival at the Homestead, addressing preservation methods and a way of life as ongoing history-making. I argue that the preservation of the Moon-Randolph Homestead must continue to emphasize survival and diversified labor but must also evolve in response to growth in visitors to and investment in the site. I begin with a brief overview of the Homestead and discuss two of my projects, one curatorial and one archival.

As intern and tour guide this summer, I began telling the story of Moon-Randolph by explaining the site is named for the three families that settled there after 1889 but also noted that Indigenous peoples’ presence and the Trail to the Buffalo predated those families. Ray and Luella Moon came to Missoula from Minnesota to Homestead, staking their claim in 1889. They came to “prove up,” sell the land, and move on. Ray Moon sold the land the same day he acquired the deed to the property in 1894. He sold the land to his relatives George and Helen Moon, and Ray and Luella left Missoula. George and Helen Moon moved to Seattle by 1907. William and Emma Randolph came to Missoula from White Sulphur Springs, Montana to buy a farm so Emma could raise chickens and she could get William to settle down. The Randolphs tracked down the Moons in Seattle and wrote to them to purchase the land.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The story of the Homestead is largely that of the Randolphs. William and Emma lived the rest of their lives in Missoula on the Homestead, which they called the Randolph Ranch, and in town. They raised their three sons there and often let extended family stay with them for long stretches of time. Both William and Emma passed away in 1956 within months of each other. Their youngest son, Bill, continued living at ranch until his death in 1995. In 1992, Bill put a conservation easement on his land, which protected it from development after his death. The City purchased the nearly 470 acres in 1997 and created the North Hills open space and trail system. Of those acres, 13 became the Moon-Randolph Homestead site. The North Missoula Community Development Corporation, a local nonprofit, created the Hill and Homestead Preservation Commission in 1998 to advocate for the Moon-Randolph Homestead. [[2]](#endnote-2)

Those who know the Homestead treasure it, though it remains a jewel hidden from many Missoula residents. The City began in 1998 a program to house caretakers on site to oversee the Homestead, raise livestock, host events, and interface with the public. The Department of Interior listed Moon-Randolph on the National Register of Historic Places in 2010. It is open to the public on Saturdays from 11 am to 5 pm, May through October, and is used by several groups during the week, including the Montana Conservation Corps, Opportunity Resource, Youth Homes, and Parks and Recreation Homestead Camps.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Dr. Caitlin DeSilvey, associate professor of cultural geography at the University of Exeter, was the first caretaker for the Homestead. She wrote her dissertation about her work in the late 1990s and early 2000s cataloging the Randolphs’ belongings.[[4]](#endnote-4) DeSilvey’s scholarship contemplates the role of decay in heritage sites. She advocates for what she calls “encounter[s] with the debris of history,” allowing deterioration to exist or flourish as a mode of historic interpretation.[[5]](#endnote-5) Her theoretical approach to Moon-Randolph was to interfere as little as possible with anything on site. Though DeSilvey catalogued all of the artifacts and documents at Moon-Randolph, the decision to curate decay and a lack of dedicated resources for the Homestead from the City left much of what was on site to erode away or be eaten by the mice that inhabit the site.

DeSilvey acknowledged in her dissertation the virtual impossibility that the city-managed property to be allowed to totally decay. She suggested that, “Future management of the site will have to find a compromise between a celebration of entropic heritage and the conservation of material traces.”[[6]](#endnote-6) I appreciated DeSilvey’s intense intellectual labor and found her arguments in favor of decay compelling, but early on in my work at Moon Randolph it became a priority for the preservation and interpretation methods at the Homestead to evolve.

The City of Missoula hired me to intern for the Historic Preservation Office and Parks and Recreation Conservation Lands Management. I worked with the current caretakers, Katie Nelson and Caroline Stephens, the City Historic Preservation Officer, Emy Scherrer, Conservation Lands Manager Morgan Valliant, and Parks and Recreation Crew Leader Kate Sousa. My major tasks during the internship included the curation of the reconstructed Mining Shed and the reorganization of the on-site archive, housed in the original, partially restored Homestead Claim Cabin, called the “Moon Cabin.” Both of these projects required a reframing of the extant interpretation and preservation strategy. The Mining Shed was entirely reconstructed, out of both new and salvaged materials, and exists directly in contradiction with the decay at the Homestead. The extensive rodent damage in the Homestead archive, along with the increased resources for and investment in the site, rendered the exposed and hands-off organization of the archive untenable.

The prioritization of these two tasks marks a shift toward formal curation at Moon-Randolph. However, we sought to maintain “The Spirit of the Homestead,” a term defined in the Moon-Randolph Strategic Plan Update. The Spirit of the Homestead aims to maintain Moon-Randolph as “a living place, where historic activities continue and new uses are established, and a place where natural processes of aging and ecological renewal can be appreciated.”[[7]](#endnote-7) The idea of “living history” at the site is not produced as reenactment or period restoration. Rather, the Homestead is kept “alive.” Trees overtake metal refuse from rusty, repurposed farm equipment. There are mice, chipmunks, rabbits, songbirds, hawks, snakes, deer, and the occasional bear. Buildings collapse. Caretakers raise pigs and chickens, haul non-potable water for irrigation from a cistern, and tend to a 130-year-old orchard that still produces cider apples. There is almost no signage and very little written interpretation. The site is left to speak for itself, otherwise visitors must speak to a caretaker or volunteer to ask questions, enjoy a tour, or help with chores.

The survival of the Homestead and its growth into a community gathering place is the result of work by a small but dedicated group of volunteers, nonprofits, and the City. My internship was an opportunity for the City to hire someone with formal training in History to dedicate roughly 350 hours to improving interpretation at the site. I proposed the structure of projects to my colleagues, but these were collaborative undertakings. The Mining Shed, a completed construction project but unfinished curation space, was one example of how I was only the most recent person to work on the Homestead, for interpretation or otherwise.

The original Mining Shed stood from around 1900 until its collapse in 2014. It sheltered a hoist for the small-scale coal mining operation William Randolph maintained on his land. Coal mining was not a very profitable venture in Missoula, though at least one company, Hell Gate Coal, successfully mined the North Hills in the early 1900s. The naming of the Coal Mine Road, which led to the family ranches of the North Hills, Randolphs’ included, suggests Missoulians knew the area to bear coal. One must still use Coal Mine Road to get to Moon-Randolph and its neighbors, the dump included.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Coal at the Homestead was likely found by George Moon, if not Ray Moon. Mining was a special interest for William Randolph, who was more of a dreamer and tinkerer than a farmer. The Randolphs’ quaintly named “Little Phoebe” mine produced low-grade coal, mostly traded with neighbors or used at home. They hired men to work in the mine, signaling either some profit or William’s financial dedication to his side projects. Robert, the middle Randolph son, wrote about the mine in his boyhood diary during the winter of 1916-1917. The Randolphs used coal from Little Phoebe until the 1930s, then let it fill with water to use to irrigate the pasture. In 1937, Robert wrote from Spokane, Washington to ask his father if he had given the coal’s use any further thought. William converted the building into a workshop but worked around the hoist, which still stands in its original place. Snow in the winter of 2014 caused the original building’s collapse. City and private crews completed reconstruction in 2018. The new building is slightly larger than the original structure but is a close reproduction of the old shed.[[9]](#endnote-9)

My curation of the Mining Shed sought to more formally interpret the space while maintaining the Homestead as a place both lost to time and still writing its history. The floor space must be kept free to use the building as a gathering space in inclement weather. It is the safest and largest covered space on site, which will be slow to change. Historic site classification restrictions prohibit new permanent foundation construction. The Mining Shed interpretation does not recreate a specific year of its lifespan but instead illustrates the several layers of its use over time and restoration. We arranged artifacts from mining and shop work. We integrated elements of the original building into the structure of the new building. This protects the in-tact remains of the old shed and makes the reconstruction apparent through comparison. I wrote limited interpretative signage and selected for display original documents from the Moon Cabin archive related to William Randolph’s mining ventures away from the Homestead.

One of my goals for the Mining Shed was to connect the Homestead to Montana’s economic history from statehood (1889) through the post-war era. The Moon-Randolph history connects Missoula’s river, trade, agriculture, timber, mining, and railroad economy and history. William Randolph’s investments and work in Montana and beyond call attention to the several ways he sought to make money outside of agriculture. His ventures included work for Standard Brick Company in Missoula, management of the Sibley timber property in Lolo, Montana, and attempts at placer mining in the Nine Mile Valley west of Missoula. Presenting this history highlights piecemeal economic survival in Montana prior to the 1960s and the survival of the Randolphs’ story through material and documentary evidence.

The survival of evidence of the Randolphs’ history reveals their parsimonious nature. When DeSilvey began cataloging the Randolphs’ belongings, it seemed the family had thrown nothing away: they kept receipts, children’s drawings, mended clothes, government report forms, locks of hair. DeSilvey’s work identifying and keeping these belongings is invaluable to understanding the Randolphs and their collective 90 years at the Homestead. However, DeSilvey’s commitment to decay and the necessity of keeping the archive on site in the Moon Cabin led to the irreversible destruction of many items. Other Montana-based institutions—museums, the state historical society, or the state universities— that might have been able to preserve or house the archive didn’t have the space, time, or desire to keep the holdings. The Moon Cabin dates to 1889, and lacks electricity, insulation, or any standard amenity an archive might require. Luckily, Missoula’s climate is very dry and the summers relatively short, even in an age of changing climate, so mold is not nearly the issue it might be in other locales.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The greatest obstacle to archival preservation at the Homestead is the significant rodent presence. Until very recently, everything in the archive sat in cardboard boxes with unprotected inventory sheets on top of the contents in each box. In 2018, Julie Tompkins, a volunteer from the University of Montana, brought several metal filing cabinets to the Homestead to put all of the paper documents under better cover. Tompkins updated what few inventory sheets remained, to account for items lost to rodents, and disposed of items significantly damaged or contaminated. After consulting with Tompkins and Emy Scherrer, the Historic Preservation Officer, we decided the remaining 26 cardboard boxes needed to be eliminated and everything put under cover in filing cabinets.

Parks and Recreation supplied three large, four-drawer filing cabinets and moved them on site. Scherrer and I then spent several hours going through cardboard boxes filled with assorted artifacts, at least two mice, and the damage they left: shredded paper, fabric scraps, urine, and dung. We discarded a small skillet caked with feces that we deemed irrecoverable. We disposed of the paper and cloth that had cushioned the nest for the pair of mice we found. We put more durable artifacts on display for visitors to enjoy, including glass bottles and tin cans, but also because the twelve additional drawers of storage were insufficient to store the 26 boxes’ contents. We left out one wooden box with artifacts recovered during a University of Montana Anthropology Department field school dig, which is now the home of the two mice we evicted.

I also produced a new set of use guidelines for the archive. Though this is a passive form of maintenance, it marks a shift from almost no management of the archive’s use. I came into the archive on a Monday morning to find documents left out of the filing cabinets from the prior Saturday’s visitors. The papers escaped damage, but fresh mouse droppings littered the top of the desk and the filing cabinets. One group of Homestead Campers was particularly interested in digging through drawers, but without knowledge of the fragility of the archive’s contents. I adjusted my interaction with children to encourage archive use under my supervision and suggested to my colleagues that we provide guidelines for unsupervised use by all visitors. Again, we sought to not totally formalize the space, given its “Spirit” and the lack of resources to actively enforce guidelines. The guidelines instruct visitors to use the archive with care, return objects to where they are found, secure all lids and drawers after use, wear gloves, now provided, and accompany children when exploring the archive. We ask users to not make marks on or remove anything from the site without express permission from the Caretakers or the Historic Preservation Officer. We included information about the Homestead’s social media accounts and encouraged users to photograph their findings and tag the Homestead.

Hopefully the update to the archive storage methods and its use will help the contents survive longer, with less rodent interference, though mice are inevitable at the Homestead. We did not finish the project as completely as we hoped. The monumental task of re-inventorying the archive remains, allowing for the City to hire another intern. Despite our modest efforts, decay will continue at the site. That will not change unless the City reimagines the Homestead as a cleaned-up, period-restored site, as is the case with certain ghost towns in Montana and the Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site near Deer Lodge, Montana. No one currently involved with Moon-Randolph is interested in this approach. Stakeholders remain attached to “The Spirit of the Homestead,” with its haphazard and half-gone nature.

Several visitors to the Homestead, myself and my relatives among them, note the similarity of the site to their family members’ properties that witnessed and collected refuse from 20th Century Montana. This is a kind way to say it is common for long-established Montanans to have brothers or uncles or grandfathers who collected junk on old cabin, homestead, and ranch sites. DeSilvey noted in *Salvage Rites* that this is part of what makes Moon-Randolph “a derelict farm at the urban fringe . . . too young to fit into Montana’s frontier mythology and too marginal to qualify as an illustration of the twentieth-century everyday.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Survival at the Homestead is “salvage turned storytelling,” of material and ephemeral Montana of yesteryear: where junk endures despite abandonment or through its reuse and repurposing, where children enjoy less supervision while exploring the outdoors screen-free, and where the caretakers must cross-country ski home when snow drifts block the road in the winter.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Though the Moon-Randolph Homestead survives by enduring and flirting with precarity, it is also lucky. Interstate 90, built below Bill Randolph’s property at the southern point of the North Hills, cut off the Homestead from Missoula in the 1960s. But this also prevented development of the North Hills beyond the three family ranches already up Coal Mine Road and the post-war relocation of the Missoula dump. The dump is visible from the idyllic gully where Moon-Randolph sits. Without Bill’s conservation easement, or DeSilvey’s work, or advocacy by nonprofits and city officials, everything Moon-Randolph may have ended up down the road at the dump. The dump is instead a part of the Homestead’s survival, and a constant juxtaposition of a bygone way of subsistence living with our modern waste-ridden culture. Survival at Moon-Randolph is a story of hard work, contingencies, paradoxes, and coexistence, a story continuing through those same means.

1. Caitlin DeSilvey, *Butterflies and Railroad Ties: a History of a Montana Homestead*, second edition (Missoula, MT: Hill and Homestead Preservation Commission, 2002); Caitlin DeSilvey, *Salvage Rites: Making Memory on a Montana Homestead*, doctoral dissertation, Open University (2003); Moon-Randolph Homestead, “History,” <https://www.moonrandolphhomestead.org/history>; City of Missoula, North Missoula Community Development Corporation, and Five Valleys Land Trust, “Moon-Randolph Strategic Plan Update: 2015-2024,” Final, Adopted by Missoula City Council May 4, 2015, 7, <https://www.ci.missoula.mt.us/DocumentCenter/View/31846/MoonRandolphHomestead_StrategicPlan_2015?bidId=>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. DeSilvey, *Butterflies and Railroad Ties*; DeSilvey, *Salvage Rites*; Moon-Randolph Homestead, “History,” <https://www.moonrandolphhomestead.org/history>; Montana Association of Land Trusts, “About Conservation Easements,” <http://www.montanalandtrusts.org/conservationeasements/>; North Missoula Community Development Corporation, “Moon Randolph Homestead,” <http://www.nmcdc.org/programs/moon-randolph-homestead/>; United States Department of the Interior, National Parks Service, National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet, Moon-Randolph Ranch, March 1, 2010, <https://www.nps.gov/nr/feature/presmonth/2010/Moon-RandolphRanch.pdf>; “Moon-Randolph Strategic Plan Update: 2015-2024,” 2-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Moon-Randolph Homestead, “History,” <https://www.moonrandolphhomestead.org/history>; North Missoula Community Development Corporation, “Moon Randolph Homestead,” <http://www.nmcdc.org/programs/moon-randolph-homestead/>; United States Department of the Interior, National Parks Service, National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet, Moon-Randolph Ranch, March 1, 2010, <https://www.nps.gov/nr/feature/presmonth/2010/Moon-RandolphRanch.pdf>; Moon-Randolph Homestead, “Welcome,” <https://www.moonrandolphhomestead.org/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. University of Exeter, “Professor Caitlin DeSilvey,” College of Life and Environmental Sciences, Geography Department, <http://geography.exeter.ac.uk/staff/index.php?web_id=Caitlin_Desilvey>; DeSilvey, *Salvage Rites*; “Moon-Randolph Strategic Plan Update: 2015-2024,” 4-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. DeSilvey, *Salvage Rites,* 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. DeSilvey, *Salvage Rites*, 176. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “Moon-Randolph Strategic Plan Update: 2015-2024,” 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. City of Missoula, Historic Preservation Office, Moon-Randolph Homestead Records; DeSilvey, *Butterflies and Railroad Ties*; DeSilvey, *Salvage Rites*; National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet, Moon-Randolph Ranch, March 1, 2010; J.T. Pardee, “Coal in the Tertiary Lake Beds of Southwestern Montana,” *Contributions to Economic Geology,* Part II (1911); [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. DeSilvey, *Butterflies and Railroad Ties*; DeSilvey, *Salvage Rites*; National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet, Moon-Randolph Ranch, March 1, 2010; Robert Randolph, Diary, 1916-1917, Moon-Randolph Archive; City of Missoula, Historic Preservation Office, Moon-Randolph Homestead Records. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. DeSilvey, *Salvage Rites*, Chapter 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. DeSilvey, *Salvage Rites,* 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. DeSilvey, *Salvage Rites,* 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)