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A MONTANA JOURNEY

RUSSELL ROWLAND

*Author of *High and Inside* and *In Open Spaces**

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West of 98: Living and Writing the New American West
(co-edited with Lynn Stegner)

FIFTY-SIX COUNTIES
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ISBN-13: 978-0-9961560-2-8

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Published in the United States by

Bangtail Press
P. O. Box 11262
Bozeman, MT 59719
www.bangtailpress.com



Cover photograph, "The Big Lonesome,"
by Wendy Elwood

Book Design by Allen M. Jones

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INTRODUCTION

I have a secret to share with you. It's about this whole Montana mystique. The magic of this place. I have lived in twelve different states in the past thirty years, and I have always been amazed how people respond to the fact that I'm from Montana. Not always, of course. Some people can't even place Montana. They sometimes know it's near Canada. And many see it as just another small part of that big empty space between New York and California. But I have often come across people who say, "Oh, I *love* Montana."

"Have you been there?" I ask.

"No, but it looks so beautiful in the pictures! I've always *wanted* to go!"

For decades, the West, and Montana in particular, has developed a reputation as a place where you can go to start over, to create a whole new persona, or become the person you always envisioned. It's the kind of place where a week-long trip to one of our more picturesque locales fuels the imagination.

The fresh air, the huge sky, and the wide open space instill in you a belief that anything is possible. It's a place where starting over can move from a concept to a reality in the course of a walk around Bozeman or a drive along Flathead Lake.

But here's the secret. The secret is that we Montanans are completely bipolar. That's right. Up and down like a goddamn bucking horse. Not all of us, of course. But as a state. As one big entity, we are completely bipolar. Why do I say that? Well, in February of 2014, Gallup did a survey to determine the "Happiest States in America," and Montana finished number one. Number one! That's the image most people have, right? That's the idea you get when you visit this place. People are friendly as hell. They really do *seem* happy. You rarely get that shiver up your neck where their friendliness indicates some kind of slimy ulterior motive. People in Montana let you go first because it doesn't *matter* whether they get to go first. They smile at you on the street because there's no good reason *not* to.

But here's the other side of it. That same year, 2014, several studies listed Montana in the top three for suicide rate. And for the last forty years, we have been in the top five every single year. What? What the hell does that mean? How is that possible? How can a place that is the happiest in the whole country...what?

Well, that is one of the many things I want to address in this book. For one thing, there is an inherent pressure when you live in Montana to be happy. Seriously—if you can't be happy living here, what's wrong with you? But of course it's way more complicated than that.

Much of the explanation goes back to the very beginning, when Montana first came into being, or at least the current form of Montana. When it was 'settled.' From the very start, the narrative about our history has been altered or often completely rewritten in order to support the actions of certain people, or certain groups of people. From the start, those who wrote our history were so intent on shining a bright light on Montana that they ignored many of the pertinent facts. Particularly the shadows.

And perhaps the most troubling aspect of this phenomena is that many of those who wrote or made movies about the West, and particularly about Montana, did not even live here. From the time Owen Wister came out with *The Virginian*, which is considered the first great ‘Western,’ writers have been presenting the stereotypical Westerner as stoic, self-contained, multi-talented, and completely cool under pressure. But Wister was a lawyer from back East, a law school friend of Teddy Roosevelt’s who came West a few times as a rich tourist.

The American West was built around misconceptions. Misconceptions and misdirection. And although most of us who live here know this by now, especially after decades of wonderful historians and journalists digging deep enough to tell the real story, many of these misconceptions still persist. Not only here but worldwide. Because they have become an important part of the American culture. They still justify certain behaviors. They romanticize the idea that men who ride into town and take care of business are the kind of men we need. The number of American presidents and other world leaders who have posed on horses, or in various “Western” activities, is hilarious, and frightening. From Reagan to Putin. And it works. It tells the public, “I am a man of action; I can handle an axe. And I look good on a horse.”

Look at Teddy. He was actually known as The Cowboy President. And he not only relished that image but he perpetuated it. Partly because it was based on fact. Because he lived it for a few years. But there was a dark side to Theodore Roosevelt’s time out West, and that contradiction fits right in with our whole bipolar history. Roosevelt moved here and built a cattle ranch when he was still in his twenties, after he lost both his wife and his mother on the very same day, in the same house, from completely unrelated ailments. He spent the next several years immersing himself in a world of physical labor. Raising cattle, and hunting like a fiend (the number of animals Roosevelt killed in his time out West is estimated in the thousands). It doesn’t take a professional to figure out that there was at least some element of escapism going on there. Roosevelt never

mentioned his wife's name (Alice) again as long as he lived, even in his autobiography. So you could say it worked for him. But none of us will ever know how much pain he buried over those tragic events. It could very well be what drove him to accomplish as much as he did. It is well documented that he was a man who couldn't sit still. And this is an aspect of the West that is still very much alive.

So why is it important to keep revising the real story of the West? Why can't we just put the past behind us and move on? Because too many people still believe the old stories. And because too many people still use them to justify their beliefs and actions. Or to try to live up to completely unrealistic expectations of self-reliance. And because it's one of the factors that contributes to the high suicide rate in places like Montana and Wyoming. The stoic, self-contained man or woman who says little, needs help from no one, and pulls themselves up by his bootstraps (how the hell do you pull yourself up by your bootstraps anyway?) dominated the Western genre for so many decades that it developed a whole generation of people who fall prey to the idea. They won't...can't...ask for help. It's a sign of weakness. People will think less of them. And it's not what the Duke would have done. It's not what Calamity Jane would have done.

In order to understand what is happening in Montana today, it's vital to understand how the attitudes and values that still hold true came about. Because these attitudes still shape the way we deal with both success and failure, and because many of the patterns that repeat themselves over and over again in Montana, both positive and negative, developed early on and have never changed. Some of this is simple human nature. But the more I read about our history and how these patterns continue the more I am convinced that most of them continue because we've never acknowledged or resolved some of the more important omissions and inaccuracies from our history. Like most Westerners, we believe that if we ignore them, they will go away. And talking about them? Forget about that.



IT WOULD BE AN INSULT TO many amazing historians and journalists to claim that this book is a more accurate depiction of our history. That's not my intent. I'm not a historian or a journalist, for one thing, so this kind of story is new to me. This book is just one man's perspective on a place that he loves and has had the great fortune of exploring for several months.

What I do hope to introduce is a shift in the narrative, a slightly different angle to our history, because it is my belief that the more voices are added to the choir, the closer we can get to hearing the whole symphony. Montana is an amazing place. But there are strong indications, like the suicide rate, that we can do better. And the first step is identifying the problems. Most importantly, the point of addressing problems is not to put the focus on the negative but to find solutions so that we can continue to give power to the positive. So that we can continue be the kind of place where people want to live. If we became so enamored with the current image of ourselves that we stop looking for ways to improve, we will stagnate, perhaps even decline.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FIRST SIGNS OF CHAOS

*“History doesn’t actually repeat itself,
but it certainly does rhyme.”*

—Mark Twain

The job of rewriting our past started from the beginning, with the first book ever published in Montana, *The Vigilantes of Montana*. Thomas Dimsdale, who was the editor of the *Montana Post* in Virginia City, wrote this book just after some very interesting events unfolded around him, and the book reads that way, like an article from the local sports page, as if Dimsdale was celebrating the heroic feats of the high school football team.

Although much has been written about this period, my own personal favorite being *A Good Orderly Lynching* by Frederick Allen, the importance of these events and the way they were reported cannot be overstated. Dimsdale was a colorful writer, and by all accounts a fine reporter, but he also had to live in the same community as the vigilantes, during a time when everyone was walking those dusty streets in complete fear. Between the Native Americans and the road agents that finally inspired the vigilantes to action, and finally with the vigilantes

themselves, people never knew when they might be attacked, pulled aside and questioned, beaten, or strung from a tree.

Dimsdale seems to have been convinced that he was reporting the events in an unbiased manner, but he had little chance of not being biased toward the vigilantes because, when it came right down to it, his life depended on it. Those who spoke out against them—and that included two of the most prominent lawyers in the region, James Thurmond and H.P.A. Smith—often found themselves chased out of town by threats of death. A few years after being exiled, Thurmond would file a defamation suit against one of the founders of the Vigilante Committee, and would win a settlement of eight thousand dollars in a Utah court. These guys didn't like anyone pointing out when they were in the wrong, and they were often in the wrong. Toward the end of their reign, a man was hung just for expressing his disapproval of their activities. And they continued to act despite direct orders from federal judges to cease and desist.

Today, at first glance, it is impossible to imagine that the sixty-mile stretch between Bannack and Virginia City could inspire the kind of greed that led to dozens of men being hung. There is nothing the least bit remarkable about the area where Bannack sits now which no doubt explains why nobody lives there anymore. But for several years this area was the number one destination for people moving West. It's even harder to imagine when you consider that most of these pioneers traveled thousands of miles, mostly by horse and wagon, and often on foot. Before there were actual roads.

It is impossible to imagine until you understand the reason. Which was, of course, gold. In May of 1863, a small group of grubby miners found gold in Alder Gulch, near where Virginia City and Nevada City sprang up, and word spread so quickly that the population of these three towns (Bannack being the third), which were then part of the Idaho territory, swelled to around ten thousand people in the next three months. The following year, prospectors pulled \$10 million worth of gold from the creeks and rivers between Bannack and Virginia City, an astonishing sum for that time, approximately \$230 million in

today's money. Over the next five years, the amount extracted from the mines in that area was estimated to be between \$30 and \$40 million.

But one of the more interesting aspects of that period is how many different groups of people converged in this place at the same time. When we think of the native population that was already there, many people just think "Indians." But it was much more complicated than that; there were many different tribes. It had only been thirty years since President Andrew Jackson initiated the Indian Removal Act, a blatant combination of coercion, bribes, and massaging of laws where thousands of Native Americans were forced to leave the regions where they lived for generations (leading to, among other horrible events, the Trail of Tears). The Dakota War, where the US Cavalry clashed with the Sioux in the Black Hills, had just taken place a year before the Alder Creek Gold Rush, and the Sand Creek Massacre was just around the corner. A good percentage of these natives had been directed toward what is now Montana, and they were not happy about it. Each tribe had been designated their own territory, which was determined by the government with little thought to these peoples' needs. And although they had developed a mutual respect for each others' territories, many of these tribes hated each other, and often battled. So there was already a volatile atmosphere that permeated this part of the country. People were already living in a state of constant danger and fear.

Add to this an incredible variety of people who flocked to the West with the news of gold. The Western films like to portray most of the pioneers as good family folk just wanting to get their hands on a nice piece of land to build a life for themselves, and of course there was that demographic. But that was not the typical resident of Montana in the 1860s.

Most of the early white folks that came West were single men who were looking for an escape from other people. They were deserters from the military, or disgruntled Civil War veterans, particularly from the South, who were pissed off that they'd lost the war. They were men with criminal records, or

men who were trying to escape families that didn't want them around. They were men who had failed in their search for gold in California but hadn't given up on the dream. They were from Germany and Ireland and the Scandinavian countries. They were from China.

The old movies like to portray all of the inhabitants of the West talking with the same Western drawl we have come to associate with John Wayne and other Western stars. But it probably sounded a lot more like modern-day San Francisco, with every language and accent imaginable. And with it, every cultural and ideological concept imaginable. The possibilities for conflict were endless.

On top of that, the conditions of the time also have to be considered. The old Western movies, and even photographs from that time, present the West in sepia tones that seem quaint and romantic from here, like a costume party. But the influx of that many people in such a short amount of time, in a place that had no water or sewage or waste system, must have made for interesting living conditions. Garbage and sewage alone provided a persistent, horrible odor. And because it was mostly men, it was inevitable that the services of ladies were soon made available, as well as copious amounts of liquor.

It is also assumed that many of these men were rough and crass and only cared about such things as drinking, fighting, and prostitutes, but there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. *The Diary of Ichobod Borrer*, a prospector who moved to Virginia City from Ohio in 1864, reveals a spirit of camaraderie among the prospectors that is surprisingly tender at times. At several points in Borrer's account he talks about how lonely he is when his partners are off working in other areas of the state, leaving him alone. There are even entries that describe men standing in a group and weeping openly because one of their friends has decided to go back home. That's not a scene you'd ever see in a John Ford movie. So apparently the image of the stoic Westerner wasn't completely accurate.

What's also remarkable is how many people who would go on to become major influences in our state's history showed up in Bannack or Virginia City during this short, volatile period.

There was the young Canadian fur trader Johnny Grant who would come up with an innovative way to build a cattle herd, trading one healthy cow for two of the bedraggled cattle that people led out West. Grant would go on to start the Grant/Kohrs Ranch near Deer Lodge. Grant's eventual buyer in that venture, Conrad Kohrs, a German immigrant who spent much of his life working as a seaman, also found his way to Bannack, which is where he and Grant first became acquainted. Kohrs would eventually be recruited by the vigilantes to take part in one of their raids, a decision that was made for him, and the cost of which he was still bitter about when he wrote his memoirs decades later.

There was a resourceful young woman of nineteen named Libby Smith who arrived in Virginia City in 1863 with her brother. Libby was working as a cook for a freighting wagon that delivered another load of people hoping to strike it rich. Libby eventually married one of the vigilantes and started a ranch near Choteau, and would become known as the Cattle Queen of Montana.

Granville Stuart, who many people refer to as Mr. Montana, spent many years in the Bannack area after moving there with his brother, James, in the late 1850s. The Stuarts were among the original prospectors in the area, but they had little luck, so they moved to what eventually became Deer Lodge. But when the big strike happened in '63, the Stuarts moved back to Bannack to establish a butcher shop to provide food for the multitudes of hungry young miners. After the gold rush played out, Stuart returned to Deer Lodge where he became an active businessman, community leader, and politician.

One of the more puzzling figures to come to the area was our first territorial governor, Sidney Edgerton. Edgerton was appointed by President Lincoln to serve as chief justice of what was then the Idaho Territory. He settled in Bannack in the winter of 1863, waiting for the warmer weather so he could make his way to Lewiston, the territory capital. Despite his position, Edgerton's involvement in the events that soon followed was mostly one of complete inaction.

Edgerton was so single-minded about becoming the first governor of the territory (he later made a special trip to Washington to lobby for this position) that, perhaps out of fear of political backlash, he made no effort to take any action or show any alliance during the years that the vigilantes were doing their business. When Edgerton was approached about charging someone with a crime or arranging for a trial, he gave the excuse that he had not been officially sworn into office. It's possible that Edgerton was an early example of why Montanans often show such exasperation with people in government.

Edgerton did eventually get his wish. But after only a year as governor, he made a trip back East, purportedly to raise money for the territory. Edgerton had not made a positive impression on many people and, in his absence, he was stripped of his title, and did not return to Montana for another twenty-one years.

John Bozeman followed Stuart from Deer Lodge to Bannack in 1863, and would eventually build the trail and the town that bore his name before dying under mysterious circumstances.

Another future governor of the state also became a prominent figure because of his efforts to establish some order in this chaotic place. Samuel Hauser emerged from this period as one of the few who seemed to have a solid perspective on what was happening and how to profit from it. When silver was discovered near Argenta, just a few miles from Bannack, Hauser financed the first smelter in Montana. He later founded banks in Virginia City and in Helena, became involved in the cattle business, and earned tremendous respect for his business acumen and fair dealings.

And finally there was a tiny, ambitious Irishman that showed up in Bannack and, although he didn't strike it rich, he made a modest amount of money from the placer mines. But his ability to make shrewd use of this small amount of money would eventually make him one of the wealthiest men in the world. That man, of course, was William Andrews Clark.

The fact that so many of the people who shaped the future of our state were there during this crucial phase of our history

still influences the way Montanans look at business, at government, at law enforcement, as well as many other aspects of communication and community. We like to look at our history through a Vaseline smothered lens of nostalgia. We like to picture these figures as rational, morally upright people who handled things much better than we do today. And when you focus on the people who managed to come out of that period as leaders of their communities, it's understandable that people would see them that way.

But what about the thousands of others who did *not* strike it rich? Not enough attention has been paid to the fact that scores of men lived in a place that was barely able to accommodate their most basic needs for food, shelter, medical care, and sex. We don't consider the possibility that many of these men, who had just lived through one of the bloodiest wars in history, may have been suffering from some kind of mental disorder as well. PTSD was not a condition that was invented later. It just didn't have a name yet in the nineteenth century. Based on the number of saloons that thrived in the area, there was probably a very high percentage of alcoholics. And wife-beaters. We don't like to think about it, but there was also probably a lot of rape going on.

Dimsdale and others like to present this period as one of great social order, but when you read Frederick Allen's account it sounds a lot more like a bizarre combination of Peyton Place and Keystone Cops, with men getting their noses bent out of shape, and overreacting left and right to slights and perceived hurts.



SO WHAT HAPPENED? YES, I was just about to get to that.

When thousands of men show up in one place and are all after one thing, there is some predictable chaos involved. Imagine just the simple act of trying to provide housing and

supplies for so many people in an area that was almost completely inaccessible. Men were living in tents, or dugouts, or tiny self-constructed shacks. Resourceful shop owners charged ridiculous fees for supplies that these men needed to carry out the business of trying to strike it rich. Shovels cost as much as ten dollars. The fight for some of the most necessary supplies, like flour, sometimes got ugly. At one point, all of the flour in the area was gathered up in one place so people couldn't hoard it any more. And of course most of these men did not find gold. The sense of desperation must have hovered over these towns like an odor.

So crime was rampant, and with no infrastructure provided to deal with it. The Idaho Territory had just been established a few months before the strike happened but Congress had adjourned before assigning anyone to enforce law and order in the region. The biggest targets for the road agents were the miners returning from their work day, or those who had managed to make a strike and had to deliver their goods to the bank. Men tried to hide their good fortune but, in a place where good fortune was scarce, that was difficult.

By Dimsdale's account, over one hundred people had been killed by the time the vigilantes finally decided to take charge and do something about the situation. Frederick Allen did extensive research, scouring through records and newspapers from the time, and he came up with a much different total. In fact, he only counted eight. But in spite of the discrepancy, the issue was clear...people were afraid to travel along the roads. People did not feel safe, and something had to be done.

There's more than a little irony surrounding the two murders that finally led people to take some action. The first was a stereotypical barroom showdown between two former associates who ended up shooting each other, one fatally. The two men had arrived in Bannack together less than a year earlier, and the one who survived was a man named Henry Plummer. Plummer was a dapper fellow who carried himself well and showed considerable charm. He had a checkered past, though, and the man he killed, Jack Cleveland, was part of

that past, and may have died because Plummer was afraid of what Cleveland might reveal to others. But Cleveland was a rough customer, not as likeable as Plummer, and most of those who knew both men believed that Plummer shot Cleveland in anticipation of Cleveland shooting others, including Plummer himself.

The second shooting involved an ex-con named Charles Reeves who also had a history with Plummer. Reeves had arranged to marry a young woman from the local Bannock tribe, a peaceful people who were well respected by the locals. But Reeves liked his whiskey and had a reputation for abusing women. His bride returned to her tribe one night reporting that Reeves had beat her, and when Reeves came to retrieve her, he was turned away.

Later, drunk and furious, Reeves and two friends returned and surrounded one of the tipis, riddling it with bullets, killing three Indians and a white fur trapper who had wandered over to see what the commotion was about. The outrage over this crime might surprise people who think that everyone was living under the “only good Indian is a dead Indian” philosophy. The fact was a good many people were working hard to maintain good relations with the natives, and the Bannocks were considered especially amiable at the time.

The most bizarre part of the story comes when these three men decided to leave town to try and avoid the wrath of the local community. Reeves knew Plummer from their days in California, and the men stopped to invite Plummer to join them in their exile. Plummer was apparently worried enough about his own fate that he went along, so he was with them when a small posse tracked the men down and brought them in. It was on their return to town that Plummer discovered how many people were on his side, as his case was quickly dismissed.

But the other three men were brought to trial for murder. A judge and jury were spontaneously assembled, as was the custom in this chaotic place. One of the men was acquitted when they determined that he had not fired his gun. The other two

were found guilty but the jury was too afraid of repercussions to sentence them to death. So all three men were instructed to leave the area and not return.

Here, the story gets stranger. It happened to be the dead of winter, so although the men did leave town, the conditions were such that they couldn't travel very far. Soon afterward, the townspeople realized that they were holed up in a cabin with little food, nearly frozen to death, and they were allowed to come back. So the result of all of this was that nobody paid any consequences for these crimes, which added to the sentiment that something had to be done.

One might assume that Henry Plummer came out of this experience with some degree of caution. That he might want to lay low. But hard feelings had developed between him and Hank Crawford, a local butcher who had voluntarily taken on the role of sheriff during these events. Crawford made an attempt to collect compensation for court costs, including confiscating the guns of the four men who had been tried. Plummer took offense to this, especially considering he'd been acquitted. Although he eventually got his gun back, a feud was already boiling over between the two men.

According to most accounts, Crawford probably generated the majority of the animosity, mostly out of fear. Crawford had very little experience with the law, and Plummer's reputation and cool demeanor apparently had Crawford convinced that Plummer was going to gun him down just out of principle. In today's world, the two men probably could have met and worked it out, with the help of a mediator, or over a few drinks. But instead, they circled each other for days like a couple of alpha dogs.

One morning, Plummer blatantly planted himself on the main street of town, his foot propped on a wagon wheel and a rifle resting on his arm. Crawford was apparently inept with a gun, and rather than risk a showdown, he decided on a sneak attack, and sited his own rifle on Plummer from behind, then shot him. The bullet entered Plummer's elbow and traveled down to his wrist, shattering bones along the way. Plummer

whirled and shouted at Crawford to shoot again, which Crawford did. But he missed.

Crawford was ostracized for shooting a man in the back, a serious violation of unwritten frontier law, and he ended up leaving town, moving to Fort Benton and never returning.

After this incident, the community decided that they needed some structure, and they held elections to choose a judge and sheriff. And here's where the irony comes in about Henry Plummer. Just weeks after he had been tried for murder, Plummer threw his hat in the ring for the job of sheriff, and perhaps because they felt the need for someone who would take action (aside from the incident with Crawford, it was a well-known fact that Plummer had killed at least three other men, although they were all determined to be self-defense), he won the election.

The events of the next few months are unprecedented in American history, which is part of what makes Montana's history so unique, and also part of what makes it so significant to the history of our entire country. Within months of his appointment as sheriff, the amount of robberies on the roads leading to and from Bannack and Virginia City rose, and Plummer did little to investigate or charge anyone, even when rumors were flying about who was involved. He hired questionable characters as deputies, many from his past, and made little effort to explain behaviors that were at the very least odd, if not extremely suspicious.

It was only a matter of time before leaders in the community drew the conclusion that there was an organized group of men carrying out these crimes, and that Plummer was somehow involved, possibly even the leader of the group. Meanwhile, Plummer continued to present the same suave demeanor, causing people to question their own instincts even when they were sure he was involved. He was living in the same house with Francis Thompson, a man who would become one of the co-founders of the Montana Historical Society, and who considered Plummer to be a good friend. And right up to the end, Thompson was unsure how he felt about the charges against Plummer.

The event that finally tipped the public opinion was the discovery of the body of a young man named Nicholas Tieboldt. Tieboldt had been hired by William Clark (not *the* William Clark) to buy some mules, and when Tieboldt didn't return, his disappearance became a source of concern. A few days later, his body was accidentally discovered by a hunter, William Palmer, not far from the house of a rancher named George Ives. Palmer approached the house to get help moving the body and was surprised when two men who worked for Ives, George Hilderman, and "Long John" Franck, refused to help him.

As it so happened, this particular William Clark had been part of a vigilante movement in California a few years earlier. When he learned what had happened to his young charge, Clark gathered several men who had been considering a similar organization. They got caught up in the emotion of the moment, forming a posse to track down Linderman, Franck, and Ives.

After riding all night, without thinking to bring provisions, the posse found a group of men near Ives's house, and discovered Franck among them. The posse was hungry and cold and wet, having crossed a creek on their travels, and many of them, probably fueled by whiskey as well, called for the immediate execution of Franck, an act that would have altered the course of the next few months dramatically. But a young rancher named James Williams intervened, providing a voice of reason among these angry, blood-thirsty men.

Although Williams was only twenty-seven, much younger than many of the men involved, he had a presence about him, and a sense of calm that apparently won the others over. He would later hold an important role of leadership within the group. That night, he convinced them to allow him and another man to question Franck before they decided what action to take. Although the men were tired and impatient, they agreed, and after intense questioning, Williams was able to coax a confession from Franck, not that he had killed Tieboldt, but that George Ives did, and that Ives was in fact hiding not far

away from where they were.

With Franck's help, the posse captured Ives, again calling for immediate action, and again being persuaded by Williams and a growing cadre of supporters that they needed to calm down, follow proper procedure, and take the men in.

The next several days were absolutely crucial in shaping the history of Montana. In the course of developing a new region, in an atmosphere that was already volatile, the line between chaos and civilized behavior was thin and constantly moving, and there were several moments where events nearly tipped into mob rule. The fact that they didn't was thanks in large part to Wilbur Sanders, a man who was on his way out of town when the Ives trial was about to begin. Some of the locals realized that Ives had cornered every lawyer in the region except Sanders and hired them to defend him, so there was no one left to act as prosecuting attorney for this vitally important trial. They begged Sanders to take on the role, and at first he was wary. Sanders was also young, only twenty-nine. He was the nephew of Sidney Edgerton, the judge who had somehow avoided taking on the role of judge since his arrival in Montana. Ives proved to be a very popular figure and the sentiment around the community was decidedly mixed about his guilt. Sanders knew he would be stepping into a very combusive situation. But he also recognized the importance of having someone take on this role, so he agreed to do it.

The decision about how to run the trial reads like a chapter from *Lord of the Flies*. There was great debate about whether to hold a jury trial or to simply have the crowd vote on a verdict. Somehow they reached a consensus that makes almost no sense, where they would have two twelve man juries, one from Nevada City and one from Junction, a nearby mining camp. The two juries would provide their recommendation but ultimately it would be the crowd vote that determined the outcome.

The proceedings threatened to become more of a farce when "Buzz" Caven, who had been appointed sheriff of Virginia City and was well known to be friends with Plummer, interrupted

to insist that his community also be allowed to provide a jury. Caven was an imposing man, and when he stood toe-to-toe with Sanders, challenging him to defy this suggestion, Sanders knew he faced a crucial moment. Caven even had his list of twelve men for the jury, and he held the list in Sanders' face and asked him point blank whether he had an issue with any of these men.

Sanders knew that things could tumble completely out of control based on the way he responded to this question, and he decided on a firm reaction. He told Caven that he did not know any of these men personally but that from what he'd heard of them, he had no desire to know them, either. It was a courageous stand, a statement that could have thrown the entire crowd into revolt, and Sanders knew it. But fortunately, enough of the crowd agreed with him to vote against the third jury.

The rest of the trial would be considered a mockery under today's standards. As a crowd estimated at nearly two thousand people shouted their comments throughout, people approached Sanders and others, spreading rumors of Ives's other crimes, including robbery and murder. Although there was no proof for any of it, and no evidence to support the fact that he had killed Tieboldt, the rumors fueled a growing anti-Ives sentiment. The case itself was mostly based on the testimony of Franck, a hideous character that the crowd took an instant dislike toward. But Franck gave a detailed account of what had occurred that day, and it fit with the facts.

As Franck and other witnesses visited the stand, the men who had stories to tell of Ives's other crimes continued to circle the crowd, getting people riled up and swaying their judgment against Ives. That evening, after the testimony had been presented, and people gathered to discuss the case, the group of men who would become known as the Vigilance Committee gathered and gave Sanders their assurance that if he got Ives convicted, the punishment would be carried out immediately. They wanted to avoid another situation where crowd sentiment prevented punishment.

The next day, with great tension throughout the crowd, the final arguments were presented, and the two juries, twenty-four people, retired to discuss their verdict. The deliberations lasted only a half hour, and when they returned, they announced that twenty-three of the twenty-four had voted for a guilty verdict. The lone dissenter would have been, and should have been, enough to demand more deliberation, something Sanders did not want. So he knew that he had to act quickly or risk losing control of the situation. He stood and demanded an immediate vote from the crowd, who roundly voted Ives guilty. Sanders immediately followed that with a demand that they render the sentence as well, and before the defense lawyers could respond, the judge agreed. Within minutes, George Ives was condemned to die from hanging.

Ives, ever the smooth manipulator, responded with a calm and calculated move. He approached Sanders, offering his hand. And as they shook, he told him that he was a gentleman, and considered Sanders a gentleman as well. And that if he was in Sanders's position, he would be willing to give him what Ives was about to ask for himself, which was another day to say goodbye to his wife and daughters.

Sanders knew he was in trouble, and also knew that it would be difficult to say no to this man without appearing to be incredibly calloused. But he was saved by a shout from the crowd that became Montana legend. A short, energetic miner and merchant named Nathaniel "X" Beidler, who would go on to become a central figure in the vigilante movement, even after it had supposedly ceased its activities, yelled out, "Sanders! Ask him how long he gave the Dutchman!"

The crowd responded wildly, and after they gave Ives enough time to write a letter to his family, he was hung. But not without a bit of further drama. After Sanders, in a moment of overzealousness, demanded that Ives's belongings be sold to cover the court costs, one of Ives's lawyers took offense to such a heartless suggestion in the face of his execution, and stood to confront Sanders.

Sanders had been worried enough about the day's events

that he had tucked two pistols in the pockets of his jacket. As the lawyer approached, Sanders reached into his pockets and gripped the pistols, ready to act if necessary. But in his nervousness, Sanders pulled the trigger on one of the firearms, and nearly shot himself in the foot.

The defense lawyer thought for a moment that Sanders had fired at him, and he stepped forward and gripped him by the jacket, but some of the men surrounding them grabbed the two and pulled them apart.

Finally, as Ives stood on a wooden box, and was asked if he had any final words, he shocked the crowd and named another man as the actual killer, a claim that would later condemn *that* man to death at the hands of the Vigilance Committee.



BECAUSE THERE WAS AN actual trial, Ives is not counted among the victims of the vigilante movement, but this was the beginning of what would amount to the executions, most of which were completely spontaneous, of anywhere from twenty-one to fifty-seven men (the latter is Frederick Allen's count, based on events over the next several years that involved various members of the group). Plummer and his two deputies were hanged just three weeks after the Ives trial. A total of twenty men, including Plummer, were hung during the month of January 1864 alone.

Among many Montanans, and many people around the country, these men are considered heroes for their efforts to restore order in a place where the community was about to be overrun by complete chaos. It's difficult to argue with that opinion when you consider where things were headed. It's difficult to argue against the fact that something had to be done.

But the long-term effects of this period of time are worth exploring further, because there are echoes that linger in our short history even now.

FIFTY-SIX COUNTIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH RUSSELL ROWLAND

Bangtail Press: How did the idea to travel to every county in Montana come about?

Russell Rowland: My uncle first suggested this idea many years ago, just after my first novel was released. I was dating a woman who was an editor at the time, and she told me there was no way any publisher would be interested in the idea, so I gave up the notion of pursuing it. But it wouldn't go away, and when I moved back to Montana in 2007 and started traveling around the state to do various events, the idea took root again and became even stronger. When I suggested it to Bangtail, they jumped all over it, and I was thrilled to have them agree to publish it before I had even started the trip or the writing.

BP: You visited these counties in a very short period of time. Were you concerned about not getting a fair assessment of them by spending so little time in each one?

RR: Yes, that did concern me. But I decided early on that I needed to approach this project one of two ways...it was a choice of either taking years of travel and research to get a strong feeling for each place, or taking a more instinctive approach and hoping that I could trust my gut about what I found. I decided that the spirit of the journey had to be as spontaneous as possible, without any preconceived ideas or objectives, so it made more sense to take more of a hit-and-run approach and trust my gut about what I saw. There was also the matter of finances. I really couldn't afford to spend years traveling or researching. I was fortunate enough to raise seven thousand dollars in a Kickstarter campaign to fund my travels, but that certainly wasn't enough to live on for more than a few months.

BP: Besides interviewing people on your trip, did you also research the history of the state?

RR: Absolutely. I read about fifty books about various aspects of the history of both Montana and the West in general in order to get a feel for how the people in this region came to approach life the way they do, and how the various patterns have emerged over time.

BP: How did you determine the structure of this book? I see that you've labeled each chapter according to a specific industry.

RR: Yes, that decision came about after much trial and error. I started by writing a chapter for each county, and it sounded way too much like a travel guide. So I tried writing it according to the order in which I visited each county, but the differences in these places were sometimes so vast that this felt way too schizophrenic. When I decided to try grouping them by the most prominent source of income in each county, the story really started to take shape. And it became very clear that no matter how people in each of these counties made a

living, there were common themes that emerged all over the state. So these recurring themes gave the story much more of a narrative arch.

BP: So what were the themes that emerged?

RR: Well there were two very strong themes that jumped out at me, especially once I started reading more of the history. The first was how much the boom-and-bust pattern of almost every industry that shaped our economy has affected the people here. People in Montana are often so grateful to have work, or to be making money from their labors, that they tend to overlook some of the price they're paying. The most blatant example, of course, is in Butte and Anaconda, where people were willing to ignore the physical effects of working in the mines because they couldn't afford to raise a fuss. This is just one example where taking a stand would have cost them their jobs. The industries that have dominated our economy pretty much from the beginning have been very good at keeping people quiet, or getting them fighting among themselves so they don't hold those who are responsible accountable for the way they treat their employees or the region. And for me the worst part of that is that it's the same people who have sacrificed the most who end up paying the price in the long run for the corporations' refusal to do the right thing. Whether it's a Superfund, or the simple fact that the corporations close their doors and leave thousands of people without jobs, the working man has always paid the price in Montana for the bad decisions of big corporations.

The second theme is self-sufficiency, or the whole myth of Montanans being so independent. It's never been true, and sadly, the people or communities that try to cling to this notion are the ones that seem to be suffering the most, whether it's with a high suicide rate or a dying economy because people aren't willing to entertain new ideas of how to make a living. Montanans often pay a heavy price for stubbornly clinging to this old idea that we need to be independent.

BP: What was the most positive part of your experience?

RR: The absolute loyalty and devotion that the people of Montana have toward this place. Most Montanans get very defensive if you say anything even slightly critical of their town or state. And there is an almost painful optimism no matter how clear it seems to the outsider that their town is on the decline.

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PRAISE FOR RUSSELL ROWLAND

"Russell Rowland has given us a vivid and distinctive piece of homespun to take its proper place in the literary quilt of the West."

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A native Montanan and an applauded novelist (*In Open Spaces, High and Inside*), Rowland spent the better part of a year studying and traveling around his beloved home state, from the mines of Butte to the pine forests of the Northwest, from the stark, wind-scrubbed badlands of the East to the tourist-driven economies of the West. Along the way, he considered our state's essential character, where we came from, and, most of all, what we might be in the process of becoming.



Wendy Elwood

RUSSELL ROWLAND is the highly-applauded author of three novels set in Montana, as well as co-editor of an anthology, *West of 98: Living and Writing the New American West*. He lives in Billings, Montana.

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ISBN 978-0-9961560-2-8



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