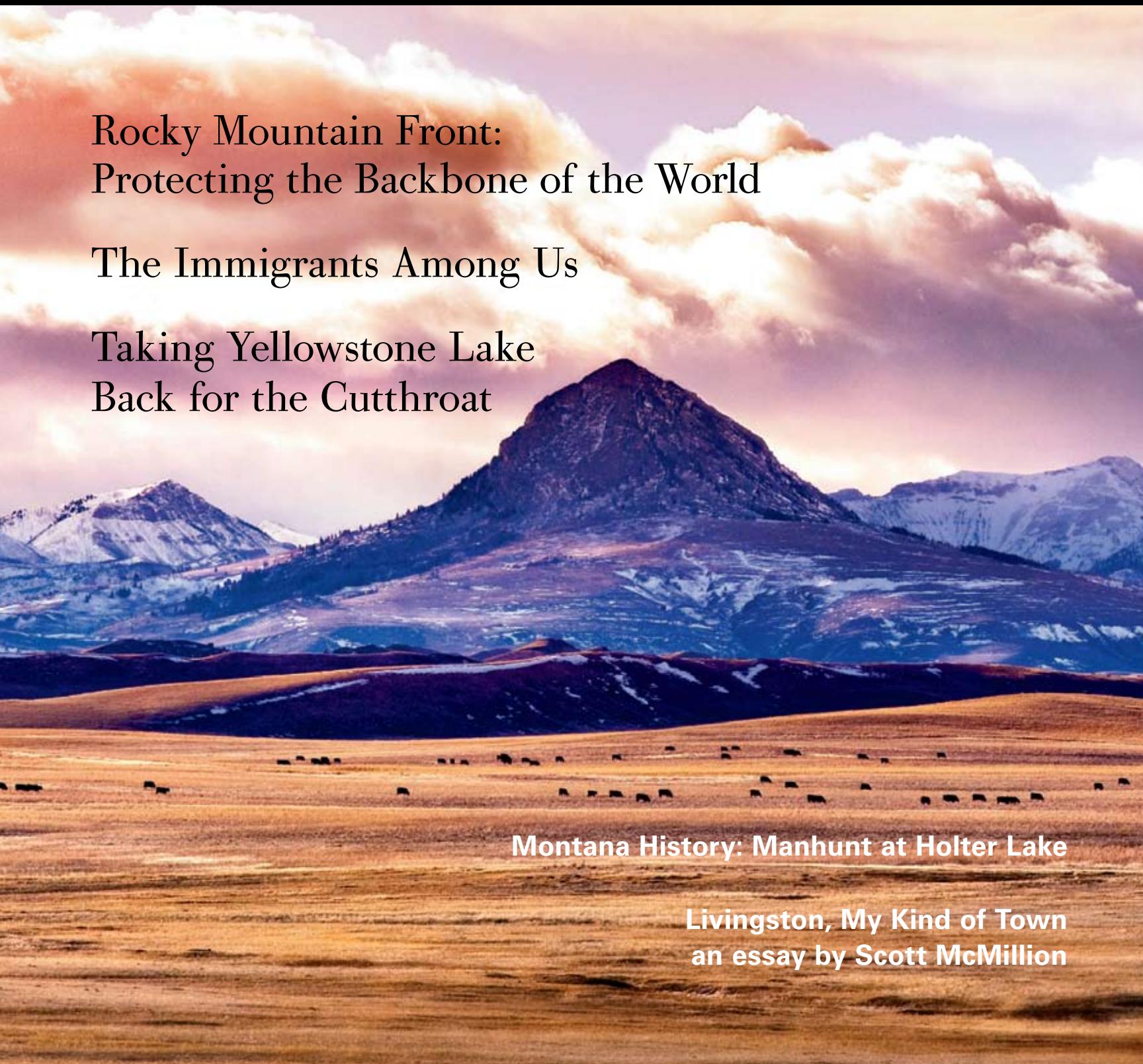


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Rocky Mountain Front:
Protecting the Backbone of the World

The Immigrants Among Us

Taking Yellowstone Lake
Back for the Cutthroat

Montana History: Manhunt at Holter Lake

Livingston, My Kind of Town
an essay by Scott McMillion



PROTECTING THE BACKBONE OF THE WORLD

Despite progress in keeping the land “just the way it is,”
a decades-long battle to preserve the Rocky Mountain Front
from oil and gas interests continues

BY JEFF WELSCH

SOON AFTER REACHING HIS 90TH BIRTHDAY, THE GREAT WESTERN writer A.B. “Bud” Guthrie Jr. scanned the undulating landscapes that inspired the words for such iconic frontier adventures as *The Way West*, *Big Sky* and *Shane*. It was mid-winter 1991, and Guthrie was fading but feisty as he contemplated the looming changes afoot to his beloved Rocky Mountain Front, a narrow strip of quintessential postcard Montana pinched between glacier-sculpted mountains to the west and endless prairie to the east.

In the fading twilight of his life, Guthrie had found a calling that had kept him as young as any octogenarian could be. Proposed oil and gas development along the Front was threatening a way of life, a connection to the land so deep that even he struggled for the words to do this big country justice. How does one measure the immeasurable? Guthrie was always determined to try and would argue with anyone — including his own son, Bert, a cattle rancher — about the power of place and the unfathomable willingness of some of his Choteau neighbors to allow vast tracts of what he described as his “point of outlook on the universe” to become an industrial landscape.

“Sometimes,” Guthrie said then, “I think the ability to be outraged is all that keeps me alive.”

Chuck and Sharon Blixrud understand the sentiment. For most of his 75 years, the weathered outfitter has gazed out the windows of his homes along the Front to the distinctive sloping flat top of Ear Mountain, which rises dramatically from the prairie west of Choteau. This view epitomizing the Rocky Mountain Front never fails to inspire even though it has been the same for the past 53 years, since the Blixruds bought the Seven Lazy P Guest Ranch just inside the

mouth of the North Fork of the Teton River canyon.

“It’s just a very special place,” Sharon Blixrud says. “And it gets more special because the world gets crazier.”

Blixrud, Guthrie and the few thousand hardy souls from Wolf Creek on the south to Browning on the north began trying to measure the immeasurable nearly four decades ago. That’s when they heard the first murmurs of oil and gas development, with the accompanying promises of riches, jobs and the patriotic ideal, more emotional than realistic, of energy independence. And they weren’t alone. All across the interior West, similar discussions were taking place in gymnasiums, meeting halls and at kitchen tables as the U.S.’s unquenchable thirst for

Sharon and Chuck Blixrud run the Seven Lazy P Guest Ranch west of Choteau.



THOMAS LEE



ERIC PETERSEN

energy ushered in an era of hellbent-for-leather development — with all the benefits and consequences that come with it.

Nearly everywhere, communities either welcomed the invasion or were powerless to stop it. Today, the results are visible from New Mexico to Alberta. On the one hand, palatial recreational facilities and libraries, fat county bank accounts, and low taxes; on the other, human health issues due to air and water pollution, overwhelmed infrastructure, decimated wildlife populations, loss of wide-open spaces, and a dramatic change to generational ways of life.

Yet the Rocky Mountain Front story is different.

How it became so is more than simply the story of protecting a ruggedly beautiful place where grizzly bears still roam between the prairies and the mountains, a place where the second-largest elk herd in the United States still forages on native grasses, a place where only the bison is missing from the diverse collection of species Lewis and Clark encountered on their westward journey. It is more than a story about preserving a landscape where sheer limestone reefs rise abruptly and unaltered to an azure sky. It is more than a story about preserving clean water, pure air and the country’s signature wilderness complex.

It is a story about people. It is the story of ranchers, outfit-

ters, guides, sportsmen, business leaders, homemakers, and an uncommon U.S. Forest

Service supervisor with the vision and dogged determination to keep the Front “just the way it is” for following generations.

In short, the Rocky Mountain Front isn’t just a big place. It’s a big idea.

That idea began modestly in 1978, when Choteau teacher/outfitter Gene Sentz and Pendroy taxidermist Roy Jacobs founded the Friends of the Rocky Mountain Front, enlisting Guthrie as their most noteworthy and potent ally. Today, after what many hail as an “heroic” decision by Lewis and Clark National Forest Supervisor Gloria Flora in 1997 to place a moratorium on oil and gas leasing on the Front, after landmark legislation authored by Democratic Sen. Max Baucus and former Republican Sen. Conrad Burns — once a proponent of drilling on the Front — in 2006 banning energy development, and after the 2010 retirement of 29,000 acres of existing leases in the Badger-Two Medicine area just south of Glacier National Park, the Rocky Mountain Front is a western anomaly. It is the rare example of a place rich in fossil fuels where locals looked at other boom-and-bust communities across the Rocky Mountains, and just said no.



THOMAS LEE

"I think when people go somewhere else and come home and see the Front, they go, 'Wow, are we lucky or what?'" says Flora, now retired from the Forest Service but still living on a ranch outside of Helena. "People really feel that this is something emblematic to Montana, that it is something we have taken care of, a place where we've looked forward and said the best thing we can do is conserve this land and conserve its wildlife resources."



Environmentalist Gene Sentz recalls his efforts as a founder of the Friends of the Rocky Mountain Front in the 1990s from his Choteau home.

Certainly the Front comes by its ability to enchant honestly, starting with its stunning physical presence. This is the heart of the so-called Overthrust Belt, which runs from Alberta into Wyoming. In a nutshell, early horizontal fractures in the earth's crust led to rock formations sliding up onto another, creating a series of long north-south ridges, or reefs. The classic example is the 13-mile Chinese Wall in the heart of the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

The first contemporary humans in this country, the Blackfeet Indians, were awed by what they called the "Backbone of the World." Similarly when a New Yorker named George Bird Grinnell first laid eyes on the region in the late 1800s, he was entranced by what he coined the "Crown of the Continent." Early settlers were similarly enamored despite the harsh winters and scouring Chinook winds, and latecomers are equally drawn.

"It's all right here," says Bill Cunningham, a Choteau author and outfitter who found a home along the Front in 1994 after splitting his previous life between Missoula, Helena and California. "And it's on a large enough scale to be a landscape — not just fragmented bits and pieces of wildness. It's something big enough to be an ecosystem. It's very unique."

It's arguable, in fact, that Montana's contemporary conservation movement began on the Front. At the turn of the previous

"I think when people go somewhere else and come home and see the Front, they go, 'Wow, are we lucky or what?'"

— GLORIA FLORA

century, settlers had all but obliterated much of the West's wildlife through poor grazing practices, over-hunting and sheer hubris. Most notable was the wanton slaughter of the bison, but elk, mule deer and bighorn sheep also became scarce. In the 1890s, the state's first game laws were passed here; in 1913, residents convinced the Montana Legislature to create the Sun River Game Preserve on the eastern edge of what is now the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

Two decades later, three designated "primitive areas" were created on Forest Service lands deep in the mountains, and in 1940 they officially became the Bob Marshall Primitive Area. This provided a safety net for wildlife in the summers. Seven years later, the Sun River Game Range was established on winter range in the foothills and on the prairie.

By the late 1970s, the Scapegoat and Great Bear wilderness areas were added to the already-vast Bob Marshall complex, new wildlife management areas were created at the base of the mountains, and private outfits such as The Nature Conservancy and Boone & Crockett purchased ranches in prime habitat. Wildlife flourished, earning the Front the moniker "The American Serengeti." For a time, The Nature Conservancy's Pine Butte Swamp Preserve about 20 miles west of Choteau was the only place in the Lower 48 where the grizzly — once almost entirely a plains animal — still migrated to lowland "fens" each spring and fall.

"I think we all feel the Front is sort of like heaven on earth," says Sentz, 70, a West Virginia native, retired fourth-grade teacher and part-time outfitter who came to Choteau in 1970 as a Forest Service ranger. "It's the best place in the world."

So when the Forest Service showed up at a 1977 meeting of professional wilderness guides with two geologists in tow, eyebrows arched. The agency announced that it was considering leasing nearly the entire Lewis and Clark National Forest for oil and gas, starting in the wild Badger-Two Medicine area just southeast of Glacier National Park and continuing for roughly 150 miles to Rogers Pass on Highway 200 northwest of Helena.

Until then, the outfitters never realized that the region had been previously leased; now they were learning that the Forest Service was trying to incorporate leasing without conducting a federally mandated environmental-impact statement.

A nervous cloud hung over the hunting season that autumn.



THOMAS LEE

Gloria Flora, now director of Sustainable Obtainable Solutions in Helena, was the supervisor of the Lewis and Clark National Forest in the 1990s and prohibited natural gas leasing along the Rocky Mountain Front.

Once they shut down their camps, outfitters returned to Choteau and collectively contemplated the ramifications of oil and gas development.

"We said we oughta see what we can do to at least temper this a little bit," recalls Sentz, who was OK with some leasing, but "not the whole shebang."

The next spring, Sentz and Jacobs called another meeting and invited the Forest Service. Just like that, the Friends of the Rocky Mountain Front were in business. When the group urged the agency to conduct an EIS so the public could comment, the Forest Service backed off. Fears faded, but the calm lasted all of four years — until the Friends learned of a provision in the 1964



The Rocky Mountain Front divides the flat prairie from a soaring sky. The Front extends from Wolf Creek to Browning and is free from oil and gas exploration, thanks to a local coalition of ranchers, outfitters, environmentalists, government administrators and business people in the 1990s.

Rocky Mountain Front when she arrived in Helena in 1995 from working in Montana 15 years earlier, but it wasn't until she began to immerse herself in the landscape that she began to fully appreciate the area's values.

"When I had the time to explore and look at it and understand the richness of the physical resource and the meaning it held for people — and not just the Blackfeet, the ancient peoples, but the current culture, and those who really connected with the Front because of their love of it and the experiences and memories it created — it really blew me away," she says from Helena, where today she runs a consulting company called Sustainable Obtainable Solutions.

Flora's passion and dedication were evident to her new constituents on the Front, but this was a territory built by leather men. Now the future of the Forest Service lands along the Front was in the hands of an East Coast woman with a degree in landscape architecture from Penn State.

Says Sentz: "I remember we all thought, 'Gosh, here's this young woman that doesn't know anything about our country?'" But she turned out the best thing that ever happened to us."

Though oil and gas leases had been OK'd for about a decade, precious little activity was under way — meaning the Forest Service would have to conduct another environmental-impact statement before re-issuing leases. The agency gathered public comment from around the country, and Flora talked with thousands of people whose lives and livelihoods would be affected, many of whom favored energy development and the amenities it brings to economically struggling communities.

"It was my job to bring this all together, to synthesize the physical with the human dimension," Flora recalls. "It sounds easy, but at the time it was very dramatic. And in a way, I would say traumatic."

After all, in those days, under the mantra of multiple-use, the Forest Service typically rubber-stamped extractive uses. The expectation was that even if the entire Front wasn't ultimately leased, a significant portion certainly would be. Flora explored a variety of options, including the possibility of so-called "directional drilling" that would prohibit surface occupancy on public lands but allow companies to reach the gas beneath them from well pads on adjacent private lands. She was, she says now, gauging residents' desires for protection. Mindful that these lands belonged to all Americans, she also listened to comments that poured in from across the nation.

"About 80 percent said, 'You didn't hear us — we said no leasing,'" she says.

Tension and apprehension mounted as the state awaited Flora's decision. Ultimately, it was swayed not just by public

Wilderness Act providing a 20-year window for mineral exploration in these untrammeled areas. In 1981, three years before the loophole expired, an oil company applied for a permit to seismograph the entire Bob Marshall Wilderness.

"That raised the hackles of every conservationist all over the state and region," Sentz remembers. "The Bob Marshall is the plum of all wilderness areas in the Lower 48. Nobody wanted this to happen."

The Bob eventually was spared when Montana Rep. Pat

Williams championed a bill in Congress prohibiting the intrusion, but the remainder of the Front's public lands was leased and limited drilling began. Three natural-gas wells were punched into the ground near the Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area northwest of Choteau. The Badger-Two Medicine area just south of Marias Pass on Glacier's border was back in play. And the oil and gas machine appeared to be just warming up. An estimated 2.2 trillion cubic feet of natural gas lay beneath the Front, and though most was tucked away in protected areas, the remainder

— perhaps 200 billion cubic feet — was coveted by the industry, even though it would merely quench America's energy thirst for little more than a few days.

Enter Flora, an elegant and eloquent woman with long salt-and-pepper hair who was a rising star in the Forest Service.

Flora was first exposed to unfettered industrial exploitation when she witnessed large-scale logging of old-growth spruce, cedar and redwood forests on the Shasta-Trinity National Forest in northern California. She had peripheral knowledge of the

comments but by what she saw across the border. At the urging of the Friends of the Rocky Mountain Front, Flora visited the prolific “sour gas” fields of Pincher Creek, Alberta, located in strikingly similar terrain about 30 miles north of Waterton Lakes National Park. She saw the spider web of roads, the pipelines, the power lines, the hydrogen sulfide emissions, the Shell Oil gas “sweetening” facility, and the mounds of yellow sulphur visible for miles. She also heard about the depletion of wildlife and decline in businesses related to Alberta’s once-wild country, and remembers thinking how “very, very shamefully” the landscape had been treated.

Flora’s legacy flashed before her eyes. Shortly thereafter, in 1997, she announced a 10-year moratorium on energy development on 356,000 acres of the Lewis and Clark National Forest.

“I realized I had to have a little talk with myself and recognize I could be ending my career,” she says now. “I could be sent off to a basement in a regional office in Milwaukee to be



A cowboy closes the gate after moving a herd of cattle onto new pasture near Pine Butte west of Choteau. Ranchers, outfitters and environmentalists have banded together to preserve the area from oil and gas exploration.

an assistant to the deputy associate director of planning. I could have been buried. But if you’re making a decision you feel is fundamentally, morally, environmentally and socially correct, it shouldn’t matter what happens to you. So I thought, ‘This is a really good decision, really sound, and so bring it on. I dare you.’

I dare you to challenge this.”

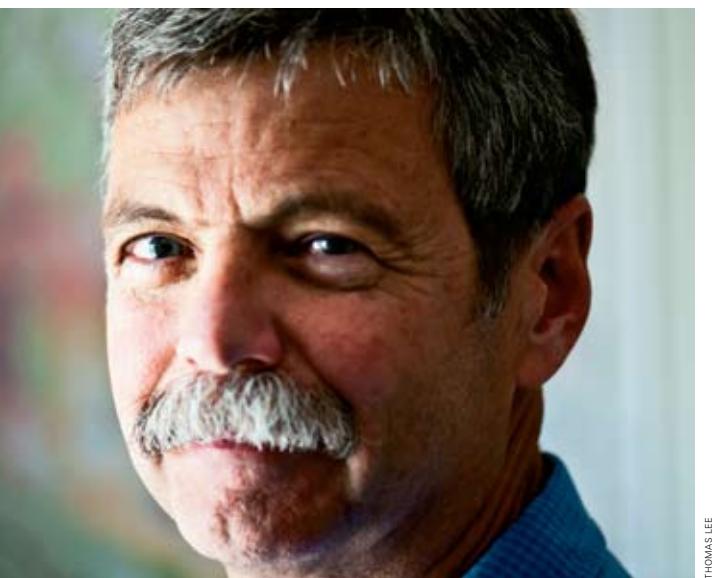
The energy industry did just that — all the way to the United States Supreme Court, where her moratorium was upheld. Fourteen years later, further protections have led to the proposed Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act, a proactive effort that creates some new wilderness and conservation areas that help keep more of the Front “just the way it is.” It also allows continued grazing and limited amounts of such traditional uses as timber harvest and motorized recreation while helping ranchers fight noxious weeds. Sen. Baucus had scheduled “listening sessions” along the Front in August as he considers sponsoring the bill in Congress.

The vision for the Front hasn’t stopped with public lands. Many innovative ranching families, starting with Karl Rappold in Dupuyer and Dusty Crary near Choteau, have worked with The Nature Conservancy to establish conservation easements that will permanently protect the character of private lands. Once suspicious of anything smelling of environmentalism, these multi-generational families have turned to TNC for help to continue working their lands. Dave Carr, Rocky Mountain Front project manager for TNC in Helena for the past 22 years, estimates that about 155,000 private acres along the Front are in easements, with another 100,000 in the pipeline. TNC’s Pine Butte Swamp Preserve is an example of some of the nearly 20,000 acres owned by organizations with a conservation bent; at Pine Butte, grizzlies roam the plains and a neighboring rancher runs Angus cattle.

“It’s been interesting,” says Carr, adding that he never approaches private landowners around. “The people who tend to approach me would really like to see the Front stay the way it is, so they have been trying to find a way

to make an income without having to turn to oil and gas.”

It isn’t always an easy decision. Economic and other forces have conspired to make living on the land even more challenging. Across the West financially strapped multi-generational ranch families are reluctantly parcelling their lands into 20-acre ranchettes. Developers are eager to snatch up properties and sell to out-of-state buyers looking for a piece of a vanishing mystique; selling mineral rights is one way to forestall what many see as an even bigger blight on the landscape.



David Carr was instrumental in the preservation of the Rocky Mountain Front from oil and gas exploration in the 1990s.

ever so slightly — not from the ferocious winds that roar off the ramparts but from spending much of his 75 years on horseback, leading hunters, fishermen and other outdoor enthusiasts into the Bob Marshall Wilderness, less than eight miles from the Seven Lazy P’s front door. A soft-spoken and thoughtful sort, Blixrud doesn’t think of himself an environmentalist. He grew up on a cattle ranch and, almost apologetically, concedes thinking that the first Montana Wilderness Association staffers he met were too much like “hippies” to make any meaningful headway with his neighbors. But when asked what the Rocky Mountain Front means to him — when asked how to measure the immeasurable — he tips his cream-colored cowboy hat upward slightly to reveal a spark in his creased eyes.

As with his old friend Bud Guthrie, who passed at his Choteau ranch six years before Flora’s landmark pronouncement and thus never saw the Front fully protected, this landscape is the “point of outlook on the universe” for Blixrud, too. Likewise, he struggles to find the words to do the Front’s magnificence justice, but he figures so long as there are threats to keeping the Front just the way it is he will, like Guthrie, advocate for it until his dying breath.

“It’s a part of you,” he says. “You don’t think about how you love it because you’ve lived in it all your life. You’re comfortable in it. And, you get a little protective of it.” □

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