

Montana Episodes

Pearl Dannel Homesteader in Big Dry Country

by Ellie Arguimbau

I first met Pearl Dannel when I decided to process the manuscripts her grandson Alan Amundson had donated to the Montana Historical Society Archives in 1979.¹

Two previous people had tried to sort the manuscripts and had given up in frustration. Nevertheless, I decided to have a go at it. I quickly discovered why they had given up. The manuscripts were contained in four large boxes, almost totally unsorted. Arranging Pearl Dannel's papers was like trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle when there were lots of pieces missing and several different puzzles had been mixed together. Shortly before her death in 1975, Pearl Dannel's cabin was vandalized and her manuscripts scattered all over the floor. When received by the Montana Historical Society they were in the same condition as when they were swept off the floor into boxes. The problem was made infinitely worse by the fact that Pearl had written and re-written each of her manuscripts several times over a period of roughly forty

1. Unless otherwise specified, all citations are to the Pearl Dannel Papers, MC 237, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena. Biographical information is drawn from her various autobiographical writings. See folders 9-15, box 1, and folders 1-19, box 2. Exact citations are not always possible because of the fragmentary nature of much of her writing.

years. Fortunately, she had typed on several typewriters during that time so I could guess pretty closely when she had written a given piece. Unfortunately, she had borrowed freely from earlier versions to complete later versions. (This was, of course, before there were word processors with cut and paste features. Her cut and paste was literal, except that she borrowed the whole page.)

As I gradually fit pieces together, I became more and more intrigued with her. As I read Pearl's writings, she came to be a friend. Like all friends, she moved me, irritated me, disappointed me, and occasionally angered me deeply.

Archivists meet many people while arranging manuscript collections. Some are famous and historically significant, and their papers cast light on important issues in history. Some are scoundrels who illustrate the worst in

*Our little home where the Cree
make me feel that it was always
they sang in the walls all winter*



human nature. And some are very ordinary people who somehow seem to capture the spirit of an age. Pearl was such a woman. She homesteaded in the "Big Dry" of eastern Montana in 1918, was postmistress in the small McCone County community of Bonin (Bow-noon), a sheep camp cook, a door-to-door saleswoman, and, most importantly, a writer and

philosopher. During her almost sixty years in Montana she wrote her autobiography, a full-length novel, numerous short stories, poetry, political and philosophical essays, and a local newspaper column.

There are many mysteries in Pearl's manuscripts. Why had she written so compulsively? If her first

husband was Clarence why did Pearl call him Anton in one version of her autobiography? If her second husband was Scotty Danniell, why did she sometimes call him Scotty, sometimes Dan? And who was Neil? He also appeared at times to be her husband. The evidence was as difficult to sort through as her manuscripts.

Pearl did not clearly distinguish between her fiction and her autobiography. She fictionalized portions of her autobiography and most of her fiction was loosely autobiographical. In any given piece it was hard to tell which. She wandered freely in time, easily drifting between events of her childhood, her early years on the homestead, and the present. There is no clear time sequence in any of her writings.

Pearl Danniell was born Pearl Sparks in Quincy, Illinois, in 1885. She came from what would now be called a dysfunctional family. Her mother was abusive and often absent. Her father, an alcoholic, nonetheless insisted that she stay in school and instilled in her a love of books. Her younger brother Bert was crippled and stunted by rickets, the result of malnutrition.

When Pearl was about seven or eight years old she moved in with her grandparents in a place known as Moody Bottoms along the Mississippi River in Missouri. The "bottom rats," as Pearl described the people there, were what Southerners refer to as "poor white trash." They were scorned by neighboring farmers who were more prosperous and lived on the bluffs above the river.

In 1904 Pearl married Clarence Unglesbee, son of a "genteel farmer." Clarence's father disinherited him for marrying a bottom rat, and the young couple moved to Quincy, where Clarence worked in a foundry and Pearl began raising their growing family. Pansy was born in 1906, Nell in 1908. In these years Pearl also bore a little boy who died in early childhood. Life in Quincy was made bearable by walks in the park and listening to free band concerts. Later Pearl Danniell would describe these concerts:

The factory and foundry workers could walk up town pushing their installment baby buggies, to sit on the grass around the old bandstand . . . as a magic reached out from the music to touch their sordid lives, put a touch of glory in them.²

Pearl was homesick for the country, however, and foundry work was destroying Clarence's health.

I wondered, why was it that we came into the world craving beauty and love to be forced to exist in such a sordid struggle? Surely there must be some way to escape the curse of poverty. Land, a farm—that was the answer.³

After six years in Quincy, Pearl and her family returned to Moody Bottoms to become sharecroppers, but their situation was untenable. When they made improvements on the farm, the landlord simply raised the rent. They were feeding eighteen-cent corn to three-cent hogs. When the war in Europe raised the price of hogs to fourteen cents, the hogs died of cholera. Obsessed with the idea of owning land, which was not possible in Missouri, Pearl began collecting



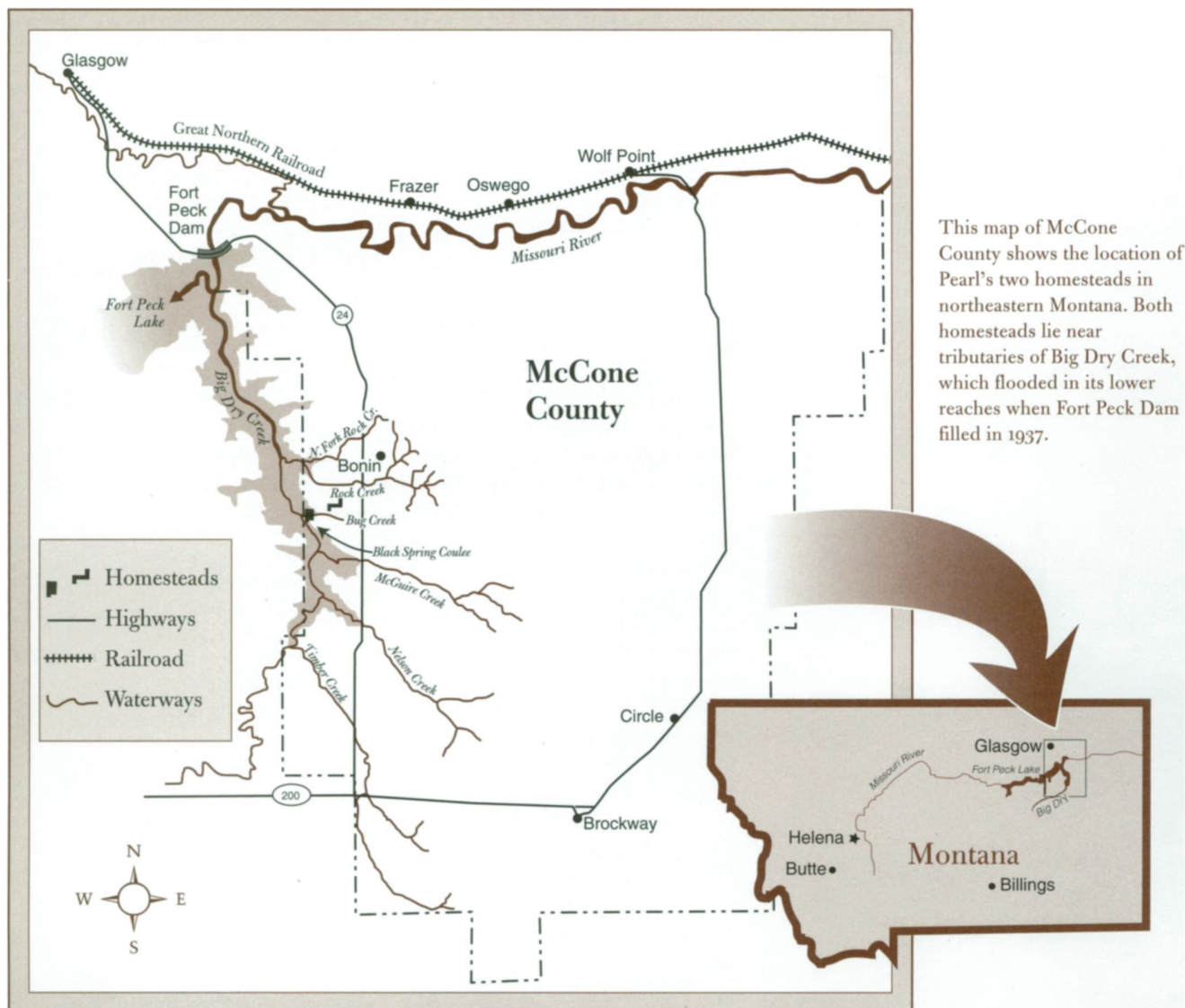
Pearl Danniell stands at the door of the homestead cabin she returned to after her husband Clarence Unglesbee died in Wisconsin in 1927. Among the handwritten notations Pearl made on the back of this photograph was the observation: "Our little home where the Crickets used to make me feel that it was always summer.

They sang in the walls all winter."

(All photographs from Montana Historical Society Photographs Archives unless otherwise noted.)

2. Untitled autobiographical fragments, p. 10, folder 9, box 1.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 11



brochures and maps extolling free land in the West. Something intrigued her about the great empty place on the maps between the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers in eastern Montana. Later, when Danniell discovered that the badlands of northwestern McCone County were in marked contrast to the golden wheat fields revealed in promotional brochures, she wondered why potential settlers were not warned about the reality of the country.

Whatever the reality, Clarence and Pearl and their two daughters headed west in 1916. At first they lived on Clarence's uncle's farm near Lakota, North Dakota. There Clarence learned that his sister, Louella Hoskins, and Louella's

husband, Ollie, had filed on land in the same area of Montana that had attracted Pearl. So the two couples and their children took the train to Oswego, a small town west of Wolf Point on the Missouri River in northeastern Montana. (Clarence stowed away with the furniture to save his fare.)⁴

Land was virtually free but farm tools, livestock, seed, and a house were not. So after selecting their land, Pearl and Clarence moved to Butte to earn enough money to get a start. Clarence found work on a ranch near Pipestone Pass, and

Pearl got a job washing dishes. Clarence broke his leg, however, and living expenses in Butte were high, so in June 1918 they made the big move. The Unglesbees, their two daughters, Pansy and Nell, ages twelve and ten, Pearl's orphaned younger siblings Edith, age thirteen, Bert, age nineteen and stunted by rickets, Billy, age twenty and partially blind, and Otis, age fifteen, traveled by train to Frazer and by wagon the rest of the way. They squatted on their unsurveyed homestead on Rock Creek east of Big Dry Creek, about twenty miles south of where Fort Peck Dam

4. *Ibid.*, 2.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

6. Untitled autobiography, p. 67, folder 10, box 1. See also "A Montana Woman's Fight for Existence on the Montana Plain,"

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 27, 1932, clipping, folder 32, box 3.

7. Untitled autobiographical fragments, p. 10, folder 9, box 1.

would later be built. As Pearl described it, the wild remote land immediately affected her:

No trees now, just miles and miles of grass, the road less and less all the time, a mere trail. . . . and such a queer land. Odd shaped formations that were not hills but certainly were rough, some of the formations just shot up from the ground to stand alone, sometimes these stood in groups, and those funny shapes—haystacks, steeples, with tall spires, some huge shaped like small cathedrals—and all around us, and as far as we could see ahead of us the land was a strange scenic sight forming in the dim distance, a wild uneven, grotesque horizon.⁵

Her early years on their homestead were difficult but fulfilling for Pearl. She and her family suffered severe hardship, living in a 10' x 12' sod house. There was no bread, and World War I had inflated the price of wheat beyond reach. They almost starved. They grew a vegetable garden, however, and even tried a flax crop, which was an utter disaster. It did not grow tall enough in the dry soil to harvest except by hand. Pearl and the children crawled on hands and knees cutting the flax with scissors, knives, and hoes, and then threshed it by hand on the cabin floor.⁶ Clarence and Pearl often wondered if they had the moral right to put their children through such hardship.

Most important to Pearl, however, was the sense of community. The year 1918 marked the end of the homestead boom in eastern Montana, and there were many people living in and around the Big Dry and Rock Creek. There were

parties, dances, picnics, and a school. Neighbors helped each other through the hard times. The men formed a "cream ring," taking turns making the long wagon trip to Frazer or Oswego to deliver cream to the railroad and to buy supplies.⁷ Pearl and Clarence took over the store and post office at Bonin. Clarence ran the store, and Pearl served as postmistress. Pearl fell in love with the land. Something in the wild, strange badlands appealed to her and she had visions of the land's great potential.

We were going to build: a community, schools, good roads, good homes, and we knew we had a great country where there was room and opportunity for all. . . . It was new, raw, and hard. . . . We had never owned anything . . . we were nonentities. Here we counted. We had an interest in something we had never had before. We were definite units in the creation of a community. This was something even more absorbing than winning a home.⁸



L. A. Huffman photographed a herder and his dogs watching their sheep on Big Dry Creek (above) around the turn of the century. Much of the creek and many miles of the Missouri River breaks (right, circa 1950s) were inundated by Fort Peck Lake.



Then disaster struck. The store and post office burned in summer 1922 (probably June). They had borrowed heavily in acquiring the store and in buying their two work horses, wagon, and plows. They returned to Butte to try to raise enough money to pay the debt and get another start. By this time, however, the Rock Creek community was dying. Most of the people had moved away, and those who were left were simply hanging on and not able to preserve the sense of community.

No picnics, no dinners, no dances, and the club had been abandoned [sic] ever since the store burned. . . . The deserted cabins, windowless looked like dead things with the eyes gone. There stood the ruins of the fences, the discarded machinery rusting down. . . . Like the lines of a battlefield where man had fought a losing battle.⁹

The community got together

and rebuilt the post office, but there was no point in rebuilding the store.¹⁰ Symbolic of the loss of a sense of community was the fact that some neighbors, instead of sympathizing with the Unglesbees, accused Clarence of burning the store to hide Pearl's supposed embezzlement of postal funds. Although the postal service cleared her of any wrongdoing, Pearl's faith in her neighbors was shaken.¹¹

This part of Pearl's life is increasingly fuzzy. Her daughters married and moved away, she

became involved in an obsessive romance with a married man (Percy the mailman), and Clarence moved back to Illinois. Pearl also grew intrigued with what would become a lifetime interest in mysticism. She began meditating and had various visions and experiences bordering on witchcraft. For a brief time in 1927 she left the Montana badlands and went to Wisconsin, where Clarence had gone for work, to try to patch up her marriage.

They reconciled, but as she and Clarence prepared to return to Montana, Clarence died of a heart attack.¹² Back in Montana Pearl transferred ownership of his homestead to their daughters and filed on her own homestead located on Black Spring Coulee.¹³ Her home area had changed, however, while she was in Illinois. Most of the homesteaders were gone. A new breed was rising, living off the wild horses that abounded in the badlands. Pearl was appalled at the cruelty she saw and the fact that their activities closely bordered on horse thievery, but she also recognized that hunting the horses was necessary to people's survival. Her brother Bert became involved, and she herself became emotionally attached to one of the horsemen, Perry Scott Dannel. In 1929 they were married.¹⁴

Pearl and Scotty had a stormy relationship. Pearl was often preoccupied with her mystical experiences, and Scotty had a split personality, sometimes warm and loving and other times cruel and bitter. (I finally realized this was the Dan and Neil of Pearl's fiction-

alized autobiography! Dan was the nice Scotty and Neil was the evil Scotty.)¹⁵

As the Great Depression worsened nationally in the early 1930s, Pearl's daughters returned to Rock Creek, as did other residents unable to make a living elsewhere. And Pearl discovered she could write. Around 1930 she wrote a letter to a friend back in Missouri describing her life in Montana. That friend submitted the letter to the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* and the paper accepted it.¹⁶ The article graphically described hard life in Montana.

This is a hard, hard land, any time, desert-like in this particular locality, most years. Though lavish are nature's gifts when it rains, as it does some years, just like it does everything, by extremes. It is almost always too hot or too cold, too wet or too dry, and life is like that here also, gray, lonely, chilling. . . . It is now four years this summer since we raised any crops. Only a few people live here.¹⁷

In the next few years Pearl had several more articles published and she began what came to be her greatest passion—writing. The writing brought in a little money, but it is hard to know how Pearl and her husband supported themselves. They relied in part on the Red Cross and on various New Deal relief agencies, but the aid given was meager and the effort to get to town to collect the money and supplies was often more than the supplies were worth.

Then in 1936 came the dam— one of the pivotal events in Pearl's

8. Untitled autobiography, p. 89, folder 11, box 1.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 116-17.

10. *Circle Banner*, July 28, 1922.

11. Untitled autobiographical fragments, p. 104, folder 11, box 1.

12. Untitled autobiography, p. 196, folder 7, box 2.

13. "For This I Came," p. 23, folder 2, box 3.

14. Marriage certificate, Pearl Dannel file, McCone County Museum, Circle, Montana.

15. Untitled autobiography, p. 347, folder 11, box 2.

16. "For This I Came," p. 25, folder 2, box 3.

17. "Hunting Wild Horses for Food in the Bad Lands of Montana," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, ca. November 10, 1931, clipping, folder 32, box 3.

18. Untitled autobiography, p. 792, folder 14, box 2.

19. "For This I Came," pp. 23-24, folder 2, box 3.

20. Untitled autobiography, p. 859, folder 16, box 2.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 932, folder 17, box 2.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 821, folder 16, box 2.

23. "Sign of the Thumb," p. 10, folder 10, box 3.

life. The Fort Peck Dam brought a reliable source of water to the Big Dry country, but at great cost to many of the people living there. The only farmable land in the Rock Creek area was the bottom land and that was exactly what was flooded. The government set the price on the portion of Pearl's land to be flooded at "market," while years of drought and depression had reduced market value to practically nothing. For Pearl, the land was not the equivalent of a market price, it was life and hard work and memory and emotion. All of these had no market value. To be paid for her land Pearl was required by the federal government to sign a statement saying she had received fair market value as of October 1937. She refused to do so, and so was not paid. For two years she fought the Army Corps of Engineers, but finally knuckled under and signed "under protest" in 1939.¹⁸ She was left with only the rough, badlands portion of her homestead and lost the arable creek bottom land. Pearl became increasingly bitter against "The Government" and its power to control her life.

Pearl's health, meantime, was poor. She had to have an operation for gallstones. She sold most of her personal possessions trying to pay for it, but since her land had been partially flooded by the dam and the rest had no sale value, Scotty sold his land to pay the rest. Bitter against her and the loss of his land, he left Pearl and moved to Idaho.¹⁹

In the next few years Pearl tried a variety of ways to earn money. She tried to get work with the WPA Writers Project but was rejected because a new rule required writers to have been on previous WPA work.²⁰ She tried to get work in a sewing project in Circle, a town thirty miles to the south, but was turned down because she was not a Circle resident. She cooked in lambing camps and for railroad construction crews. She went to the Bitterroot valley to pick cherries, she returned to Butte and did home care for an invalid woman for thirty dollars per month plus room and board. She hitchhiked around the state looking for work. Pearl's hitchhiking experiences caused her to be cynical about women. Men gave

her rides, though often propositioning her; women never gave her rides.²¹ A Billings employment office refused to refer her to jobs for fear that doing so for one non-Billings resident would attract other unemployed people to Billings to become public burdens.²²

In 1940 when she was fifty-five years old, Pearl and her friend Nellie Hoskins Nelson hitchhiked around the Dakotas, Wyoming, and Colorado and then down to Arizona and New Mexico to sell cosmetics door-to-door. They also hoped to sing their own songs on the radio. Everywhere Pearl went she was a keen observer of the land and the local people she met along the way.

I saw the small fruit farms in the Valley of the Rio Grande; the peppers, and corn that hang upon the walls of the homes in sunny New Mexico. I saw an old, old church built of adobe bricks that has walls as thick as a fortress. It took seventy-five years to build it, and it stood without repairs for over four hundred years. . . . I saw the women sweep their dirt floors with wisps of hay. I saw the tortillas, the outdoor ovens, the thick black hair on the heads of the children, and the blond heads and olive skins of the Castilians.²³



Fort Peck Dam construction, circa 1934: The railroad on its pile trestles and steel bridge across the Missouri River almost completely surround the area to be filled with more than 130 million cubic yards of earth, gravel, and rock. The town of Fort Peck is shown on the bench above the dam site at top.



Pearl petitioned Montana Congressman LeRoy Anderson (far left, 1956) and Governor J. Hugo Aronson (center, 1957) to build a scenic road that followed the contours of the Fort Peck lakeshore. When the road was finally built, Montana Highway 24 (below) was bullet-straight and in no way resembled the road of Pearl's dream.

In El Paso, Texas, she was turned away by the Salvation Army and sent to the police station. The police took her to a sporting house where she was given a room for the night.

After being defeated by the Army Corps, Pearl's second big campaign was "The Cut-Off Road." The Rock Creek area is remote and rugged. The soil is gumbo when wet. Pearl began a campaign to build an all-weather road into the area. She also acquired a new vision of what the area could be.

A lovely, curving scenic highway following the lake shore. Beside the lake a little town with trees, and flowers, beauty. Warm comfortable homes, medical help within easy reach—beacon lights to mark shelter houses for the use of the public, with heat in them. A park for the ponies, the wild little broncos. Electricity, modern way of living for my Loved people of home. For my loved Badlands.²⁴

She spent two months and got two thousand signatures on a petition asking for a road. She took the petition to Governor J. Hugo Aronson, who treated her with

24. Untitled autobiography, p. 53, folder 19, box 2.

25. "The Montana Swede and the Way He Dealt with the Cut-Off Country," p. 6, folder 6, box 7.

26. "Washington, D.C.," pp. 6-7, folder 22, box 7.

contempt, saying, "Oh hell, that ain't a bad road . . . I drove a truck route over worse than that when I was a young man."²⁵ She then hitchhiked to Washington, D.C., to present her petition to President Dwight D. Eisenhower. It is interesting to imagine this seventy-year-old woman arriving on the White House steps, disheveled from hitchhiking, and asking to see the president of the United States! Naturally she was refused an audience. Pearl replied that "Our President might as well be a prisoner . . . He is not allowed,

27. Notes of conversation between Alan Amundson, Pearl Danniel's grandson, and Sue Jackson, archivist, in Montana Historical Society Archives accession file, AC 79-49.

28. "Pen Picture of Grinding Toil of Modern American Pioneer: One Family's Plight in Montana," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 12, 1934, clipping, folder 32, box 3.

has no chance to know about things affecting the people."²⁶ A White House staffer even threatened to have her put in a mental hospital if she was too insistent. An unconfirmed story says she confronted Eisenhower as he came off the golf course. She also visited the Bureau of Public Roads, and the office of Congressman LeRoy Anderson, but without effect.²⁷

The road was finally built, but it did not resemble Pearl's vision at all. Montana Highway 24 goes bullet-straight for forty miles ignoring topography and with the lake rarely visible. It is not the thing of beauty that Pearl envi-

29. "I Fried a Cow," p. 4, folder 18, box 3.

30. "Slum Timber," unpublished novel, folders 1-15, box 4.

31. "A Harlot's Children," folders 9-11, box 5.

32. "A Flea's View of the World," p. 59, folder 1, box 6.



sioned, but it did make the area accessible and remains, perhaps, Pearl's greatest achievement.

Pearl's writing is difficult. It is often awful. It violates every rule of good writing. Much of her political writing is polemical and borders on the paranoid. She was bigoted and intolerant. She could not keep to a topic and wandered in a stream-of-consciousness from one thought to another. That said, there is still a tremendous appeal to her writing. She cared. There is an immediacy and genuineness that tugs at you. She became most lyric when talking about the land. She craved beauty and saw it in the land. Her descriptions of the Montana badlands and the wild horses that lived there are among her best writing.

[I got my] greatest happiness from watching the herds of wild horses come down to the creek to drink. . . . When I can no longer see the Hall Outlaw and his bunch, the Buckskin Mare and her tribe . . . when I cannot hide in the hole in the bank and watch the wild ducks play in the deep pool, and the muskrats talk together in the evenings, as the wild mares and colts come down to graze the greener grass of the lowlands along the creek . . . how can money compensate for that?²⁸

During the 1950s and 1960s, Pearl had a regular gossip and local events column in the *Glasgow Courier* and the *Circle Banner* titled "Rock Creek-Bonin News," "Rock Creek Ramblings," and other names. She reported on community doings such as who was visiting who. She also used the

33. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

34. "The Lonely Coyote's Howl," poem in "The Heart of an Old Woman," unpublished booklet, p. 13, folder 3, box 6.

35. Elliott West, "Stories: A Narrative History of the West," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 45 (Summer 1995), 65.

column occasionally as a vehicle for political diatribe.

Pearl had a puckish sense of humor. Her essay "I Fried a Cow" about what it meant to be a westerner, or a "Westerner" as she described self-conscious would-be westerners, is wonderful. For example, she wrote:

Cowhands takes off their hat the last thing when they goes to bed. That is so that people can't set down on it. You kin call um names, do um dirty, but they jest ain't no greater insult to a real westerner than to set on his hat.²⁹

Pearl Danniell wrote one complete novel. Titled "Slum Timber," its setting was in the Mississippi River bottoms of her youth. The novel concerns a dogooding reformer who decides to build levees to control flooding on the river and as a result destroys the lives of the people of the area as well as the beauty of the river bottoms. Pearl was, of course, also describing Fort Peck Dam.³⁰ Another incomplete novelette, "A Harlot's Children," chronicles the lives of the horsemen of the Montana badlands.³¹

One of her most ambitious projects was a three-hundred-page history of the world—in verse—titled "A Flea's View of the World." Three hundred pages of limping, tortured rhyme. In it, she covered the life of Jesus:

. . . men must have wonders as in days of old
So the story of Jesus and his birth is told

In the Bible, a miracle birth
Like Budda except that a woman brought Jesus to earth
Now you take the story for what it is worth
If you can believe it, then for you it is true
For Faith has the power all things to do . . .³²

She also wrote of Napoleon:

The man Napoleon had been watching France,
And working in her army,
waiting for a chance
For vengeance on her because of his homeland
The little island of Corsica, and France's command
Of it. He held a silly dream
Of Corsican independence, and it seemed
To him that he was the one to take
Up the battle, so he waited for a break
To come as he ruthlessly hewed at the obstacles that stood in his way
And during the Revolution he had too much to say
And almost lost a head to La Guillotine
And to win back public favor he did the mean
Trick of raiding the land he loved



Pearl Sparks Unglesbee Danniell, circa 1953

But that saved his neck. He had
to prove
To the Italians, "what it meant
to be free" . . .³³

And on and on—for three hundred
pages.

Pearl could write truly beautiful
poetry. She wrote a little book of
poems titled "The Heart of an Old
Woman" that included a wonderful
little gem called "The Lonely
Coyote's Howl."

It's a lonely bugle calling
Across the windy hills
It sings of blood upon the trail,
And of bellies to be filled.
'Tis as haunting as the laughter
Of love's first awkward try
As old as the song the wild
goose sings
Of adventure in the sky.

It's dark as deepest midnight.
It holds courage to meet life.
It is primitive and savage
As murder with a knife.
It sets the air to throbbing,
And makes one want to sway
In a rigadon that tells the tale
And is the only way.

To tell of things that have no
words
Of things Man can't endure
When he must seek the walls of
home,
And pray for something pure.
It sings of night, and cold and
pain
Of Death beneath his cowl.

It holds the sorrows of the world
The lonely coyote's howl.³⁴

During the last few years of her
life, Pearl was no longer able to live
year-round on her homestead, and
spent her winters with her daughter
Nell McCartney in Miles City. She
died in the hospital in Sidney on
June 14, 1975, at the age of 90.

Pearl Danniell's life is difficult to
evaluate. In many ways an illustration
for one newspaper article Pearl
wrote epitomizes her life. In the
illustration, a haggard, worn-out
woman represents the reality of
hardship lived by homesteaders in
the Big Dry of eastern Montana.
The overflowing haystacks, the
schools, the playing children
behind her all represent the vision
of a life that lured so many people
to the plains in the early 1900s.
The fact that Pearl Danniell wrote,
and that her adoring grandson Alan
Amundson had the thoughtfulness
to donate her writings to the
Montana Historical Society, gives
her life a special significance. It is a
view of the life of the homesteaders
as only one of them could tell it. In
a recent commentary, Elliott West
says that stories about the West
have power. "Western history," he
writes,

has been shaped by exchanges
among people, land, and
animals and by evolving institu-

tions like the family, but each
part of the West is also what it is
because of the stories people
have told about it. I am referring
in particular to narratives
considered as specially associ-
ated with a particular place.³⁵

Pearl Danniell wrote exactly such
stories. Archives are full of real
people and their life experiences.
Many of them wrote their stories in
diaries, others in letters home to
their relatives. Some of them
bought into the "myth of the
West." Pearl Danniell wrote from
hard, bitter experience, tempered
by a romantic vision of the possi-
ble. The more of these real stories
that are examined and pondered,
the more real our view of the West
will become. *M*

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western history collections at the
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Ellie Arguimbau, photographer

Pearl's Rock Creek-area cabin (left) still existed when the author
visited it in September 1994. Five generations photographed circa
1972 (below). From right to left are: Pearl; Pearl's daughter, Nell
McCartney; Nell's daughter, Carmen Kassner; and Carmen's
daughter, Linda West, with her son, Brent.



Courtesy the Sevier Family