

Second Life

By Frances Judge

A Beautifully Written Account of the Courageous Later Years of the First White Woman at Bannack

We shared the deep, slow summers of Maw's second life; the life she began by homesteading when she was an old woman. We were kids together, she in her early eighties, we three—Bill, Ruff, and I—not far from eight. Bill and I are twins, Ruff (Rutherford) a year younger. We children and Maw, our great-grandmother, lived in a free world of our own.

The homestead was near the Buffalo River in the Jackson Hole valley in Wyoming. It was shadowed by Burro Hill, which blends into greater hills that blend into mountains that completely surround the valley. The stupendous Tetons, thrust up without foothills, brace the valley to the west and outshine the surrounding quieter mountains—outshine Burro Hill. This valley was the center of the world, this cabin the center of the valley, for us children.

Maw's land joined Gram and Gramp's, but her cabin was a mile from the buildings of the main ranch, dwarfed by a dozen huge Douglas fir trees that semi-circled the little house. Beyond the great trees were wild hay meadows cut here and there by willow-bordered sloughs.

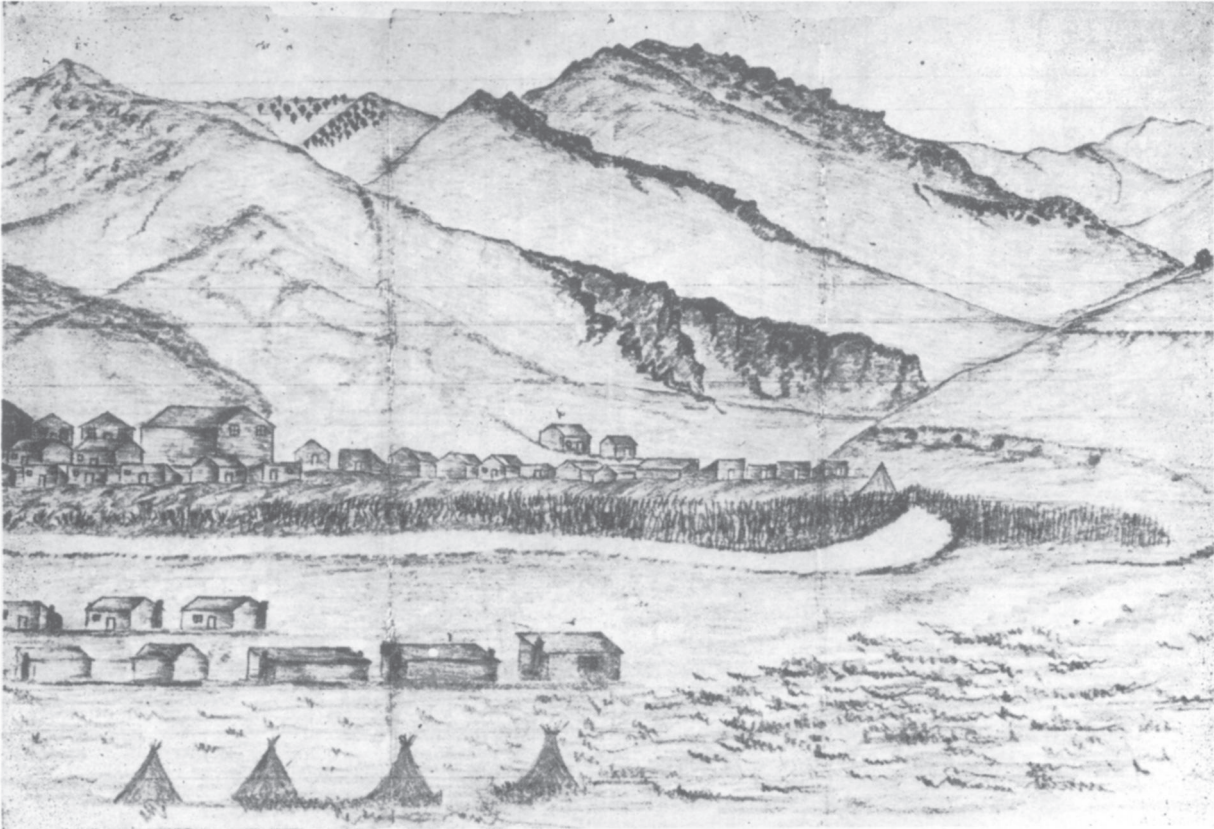
Gramp had built Maw the one-room cabin when she first filed on the homestead. She was not to spend all her re-

Whether the setting be Jackson Hole, Wyoming; Horse Prairie, The Musselshell or the Mispah, this is a magnificent account of western homesteaders and of frontier personalities. Because it is beautifully written—a rare gem which could not be duplicated from our own files—we are honored to reprint "Second Life." Permission has graciously been granted by the Editors of THE ATLANTIC magazine and by the author. We believe all readers will concur that "Second Life" lends itself so well to our endeavors that it simply had to reappear in the MONTANA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY.

maining years there; only the three required for proving up. It was customary, at that time, for an ambitious rancher to acquire more land by having someone within the family or a hired hand on the ranch take up the land for him. That was Maw's purpose in homesteading: to turn over the land to her daughter and son-in-law. And she was happy to do this; it made her life in this valley purposeful.

Maw's log cabin had a sod roof, weed-grown, and a brushed earth floor that had been dampened and swept until it was as hard as cement. Strips of carpet were laid beside the little iron cooking stove, the table and bed, to lift the chill from one's feet. The inside of the cabin was papered with magazines, and Maw had used strychnine in the dough paste as a quick, sad surprise to mice and rats. But the poison never eliminated them all; more were being born all the time under the willows and in the grass of the fields to move in on us. Unbleached muslin formed a low ceiling to make the room lighter, and warmer in winter, and hardly a day passed but what some of us saw the four-pawed imprint of a rodent as it made its quick way across the sagging ceiling.

Frances (Mrs. Paul) Judge is the wife of the Chief Ranger of Grand Teton National Park. She is a great-granddaughter of Mary Jane Wadams, which probably accounts for the sparkling quality of this—her first major published work. She is now doing a book on her mother, Carrie Nesbitt Dunn, who was born on the Medicine Lodge in Montana and came to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, via horseback when she was eleven years old. It sounds like a natural, particularly if it includes her father, William Dunn, who bossed mining crews in the camps of Nevada, Idaho and Montana.



Bannack in 1862, as sketched by an English artist, Robert Halliday, of the Fisk Expedition. Original in the Montana Historical Society Files.

Behind the door stood a bone-handled knife at least two and a half feet long. It had come across the plains with the Wadams family a half century earlier and was now used for the hopeless task of grubbing willows and the very exciting—though also hopeless—task of trying to stab rats or mice. Whenever one of us children saw the moving depression of four feet and dragging belly on the muslin ceiling, he would grab the long knife, jump on chair, table, or feather bed, and quickly run the blade through the material, hoping to run it up through the rodent. We were never successful, but never gave up hope of seeing blood flow down the blade. The hole would gape at us until Maw climbed up on a chair with twine on a great needle and sewed up the rent, complaining with every stitch about rats and mice and her aches and pains.

When she pulled herself down—surely she was too light for gravity—she would explain where her pain began and ended. Running a finger diagonally across my back, and wavering as though following

the course of the Buffalo River, she would say, "The pain starts right up here and ends way down there." We would shake our tousled heads and say we were sorry, but being full of the natural health of the young we could not possibly understand.

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Maw was born Mary Jane Baisinger; where, I do not know. At fourteen she married Wilson Wadams and lived at Wadams Grove, out of Freeport, Illinois. In the early 1850s they moved to Iowa and lived at a ferry landing on the Mississippi. In '59 the gold rush took them to Colorado. After two years at Pikes Peak they moved on to the gold strike on Grasshopper Creek in Montana, arriving at the mining camp of Bannack on September 18, 1862. The Wadams family came with covered wagon, oxen, cows, and horses. The oxen had been used in yoke. Maw found herself to be the first white woman in this boom town. In 1864 Bannack became the first capital of the Territory of Montana.¹



This early picture of Mary Jane Wadams was taken by the writer's grandfather, James Nesbitt, about 1880.

Whenever Maw spoke of Bannack we children were on familiar ground. We knew this bleak mining camp; Dad operated the gold mines there. Near the road that led in and out of town was a huge cemetery filled with stark tombstones. Most of the people of Bannack were in the graveyard, and sage spread over the graves and away in a never ending blanket of gray. Throughout our winters at Bannack we always talked of returning to Jackson Hole and Maw.

Breakfast over at last, we four—carrying five-pound lard pails for water—would take the trail through cottonwood and willow to the Buffalo River. These short trips took time because Maw had to stop for breath and also to admire the Indian paintbrush. Before this flower bloomed she watched for it; after it faded she stared where it had grown. “It’s always been my favorite,” she would say. And Bill had to contemplate every bug and bird along the way, while I bruised willow leaves in my hand to smell the sharp odor, or put my tongue against a rock to enjoy the pleasant taste of earth dust. But Ruff’s goal was the river; he hurried and got there and then dreamed out loud of the great house he would sometime build for Maw across and under the exciting fringe of mysterious evergreens. He could not realize that Maw’s homesteading was not a timeless duty.

While Ruff dreamed, Maw would shade her eyes in spite of her slatted sunbonnet, scan the little river, and tell us of

her trip down the Missouri from Fort Benton, Montana, late in the year ’63—the only journey she ever made back to Illinois. Lou was just so-o-o high, and Dick—her hand stretched up for Dick, he was ten years old. Road agents followed them to Fort Benton from Bannack and in secret ran long knives through Maw’s carpet-bags to find out if she were carrying gold dust. And once, while on the month-long trip down the Missouri, the fires were allowed to die on board the steamer in order to clean the boilers. Lou and Dick disappeared while the boat was at the shore line, but were not missed until the boat had drifted out into the river. The fear of Indians was with everyone. In order to get up steam in a hurry and get the children back on board, soap, lard, and any kind of grease were used on the fire to move the vessel back to shore. The two children were safely gathered up, but the steamer’s soap and grease and Maw’s patience were used up in the rescue.

But Indians did follow the shore line, now and again, watching the boat. The steamer carried no guns and the passengers were nervous, so one night stovepipes were rigged up on deck, pointing toward shore and partially covered with blankets, to look like cannon mouths. Either the boat was not in imminent danger or the sham cannons served their purpose, because the boat reached St. Louis without mishap.

While they were East, the notorious road agent, Henry Plummer, and two members of his gang were hanged at Bannack. Wadams Grove, Illinois, was as close as Maw wanted to be.

We children never knew how much was fact, how much was fiction, that Maw told us, but we did know that all was told in good faith.

If ducks winged low overhead, and settled nearby on river or slough, Bill would say, “Maw, let’s me and you go hunting.” Bill was taught to shoot when

Left is Mary Jane Wadams in the yard at Bannack, with Mrs. Ney, another Montana pioneer. "Maw" then was in her early seventies.

he was seven, and he was an excellent hunter.

In a short while the old, old woman and the thin little boy would move off through the willows with a small twenty-two rifle, their bodies making hardly a sound against leaf or twig. In an hour or so they would return, Maw's long skirts dragging the grass, her body fagged, but her shoulders straight. Bill would be grinning if Maw carried a duck or two (he always carried the gun). When there were birds I would help Maw skin them and put them to soak in salt water, while Bill sat on the step, telling Ruff about the silent excitement of the hunt.

The kill always brought forth stewed duck with dumplings. Surely Maw's original dumpling recipe did not call for feathers, but there they were, clinging to the glistening, blue dumplings that Maw rolled out and cut in oblong pieces before cooking—that was the way Bill wanted them, and he was the idol of her heart. The bluer, the more glistening, the soggy they were the better he liked them. They must have hit the bottom of our stomachs like a boulder, but in time our tea undoubtedly disintegrated them, because we never suffered any ill effects.

Bill and I accepted everything about each day with open arms, except wood gathering. Maw had made each of us a long canvas apron that demanded stitching only at the neckband and waist strings. The end was held up in one hand, the cradled apron filled with wood. Bill and I always put on ours reluctantly as we followed Maw through the sage and into the sparse cottonwoods along the river. But Ruff, born to work and glad to work, rushed into his apron, filling it with dry, twisted sage, cottonwood bark, and willow sticks as quickly as possible. He exuded enthusiasm, whereas Bill and I pouted. We wanted the unmolested joy of our own pursuits.

SUMMER, 1953



While gathering wood Maw often ripped her flesh on bark or sage. It tore like paper. She would lay the skin in place to dry and in time heal. She did not mind; she tore her flesh in the house too, on nails or other sharp objects. Nothing kept her from wood gathering. The lean-to that she had built against her house with old boards and boxes and other scraps was always full of wood that Gramp hauled from the main ranch, so we children could not easily understand why that was not used. Gramp would gladly bring more. But no, Maw must have it for emergency, just as she saved string and paper and most every other thing that came into her cabin. She had spent one lifetime in far-away places that could be reached only by freight wagon, and had started another in the same fashion, so she was hipped on frugality.

After wood gathering, freedom usually spread out around us again in an aura of hot summer quiet, laced with a myriad of delicate sounds. Sometimes we just lay in the sun near the door—where Maw sat popping her knuckles—conscious of the pumping song of some bird, the thin sweet song of another, the cry of a raggy-winged crow, the saw of grasshoppers through the air, or the distant, uneven thump of the clubfooted horse wandering through the willows. Often Maw, Ruff, and I would watch Bill patiently set a figure-4 trap under one of the fir trees. Whenever a bird was caught, we examined it minutely and lovingly and then gave it freedom. Once we watched Bill worm along the ground and in his patient, quick way, catch a bird by the tail—a great wonder to the rest of us.

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But that was Bill. He could reach out and catch a fly in mid-air.

Whenever we had an overabundance of energy, we grabbed hoe and knives and grubbed willows. This was harder work than carying wood, but it gave our imagination free rein. We glimpsed the future. We could see the fields bare of willow where wild hay would spring up, unchoked. Fortunately we never got far with knife or hoe; we never caught up with our dreams, or we would have missed the joyful things the willows sheltered, such as paintbrush, small toads, and birds. During this stretch of work much of our time was spent resting in the shade of the willows we were trying to grub, eating Maw's puffy sweet bread or twister doughnuts, while she lived in the past.

Our immediate exploits were as exciting to Maw as her stories of the past were to us. Once while she puttered around the house, we children wandered some distance away. A fluttering noise brought our eyes to a gopher trap that held a magpie. Someone had set the trap and forgotten it. The bird's legs were broken by the steel jaws. Bill held the magpie while Ruff opened the trap. With a sudden play of muscles and a fierce beating of wings, the bird freed itself from Bill's hands. After flying a few yards it tried to land on the buck fence, but fluttered to the ground and lay on its side, apparently bewildered by its own ungovernableness. I cried silently, and Bill stood transfixed, and Ruff cussed, and kicked the crusty earth and scolded us both—he was sorry too and didn't know how else to show it. Soon the broken bird struggled up into the hot air and flew away, to be wondered about forever.

Once, while alone, I found a woodpecker's nest in the bole of a tree; the hole low enough for me to reach. I put my hand through the drilling and, when the full realization struck me of what I had found, my stomach revolted with prickling nausea. I put my fingers into

sticky feathers, decaying flesh and maggots.

Sometimes we picked wild strawberries, but mosquitoes always seemed to grow thick where the strawberries grew thick. When we returned with our small hoard of rich, red berries, Maw would have us bathe our arms and legs in salt water and let the skin dry without being wiped, so that the salt would remain and act as a healer when we scratched.

In the spring and early summer when the river ran high, part of it eddied into an old slough trough, forming a lovely basin of gray mud. Once we children decided to surprise Maw by rolling naked in the slime. We caked our bodies from chin to heel and then marched to the cabin, where Maw stood in the open doorway, one hand shading her milky eyes, her lips moving silently over her thoughts. When the three of us came into focus, her mouth gaped round like a gopher hole and she slapped her skirts in delight. "Tarnation! Well, I do . . . Tarnation!" And she allowed us to stand around in the sun until the mud dried and caked and cracked, making our bodies pull and itch. What fun it was! And we didn't get all the mud off until Mother herded us to Gram and Gramp's and into the tin tub. Once each week, sometimes oftener, we were corralled on the main ranch, scrubbed, our nails cut, our hair washed and combed. Then, with a clean flour sack filled with fresh supplies, we would return to freedom. Within the sack—along with bread, meat, and other food—would be fresh stockings to be changed frequently. Maw was reminded to remind us, but we all forgot when we could. Fresh, tight stockings . . . what an itch and a bother!

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At sunup each morning Maw rose from the bed she had used more than one lifetime and built a fire. We children would be wakened by the scraping sound of the lifter moving over the stove as Maw, in her partial blindness, searched

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Bannack during its declining years, where William Dunn, the author's father, functioned as a mining engineer, and where "Maw" returned to reminisce of early, more exciting boom days.



for the grooves that held the lifter. We three would watch her from the bed, our minds filled with the excitement of the coming day, our nostrils filled with the odor of burning pitch and sage. Always for a few minutes Maw would stand with her back to the stove, her voluminous flannel gown lifted to let the heat reach her dried, wiry body. I cannot picture her as a young woman; she was so very old when we first knew her. Her face had shriveled and sunk with age, leaving her cheekbones and high, curved nose prominent under the withered skin. Her eyes were milky, her lips puckered.

When the cabin relaxed with heat, Maw would remove her gown and stand in her underwear. Maw's underwear caused a storm on the ranch each spring. She would insist on changing from heavy-weight winter to light-weight summer underwear on the first day of May, no matter what. Gram, who was never known for her mild disposition, always raised the roof—sod and all. But in spite of storms inside the house and out, Maw changed to light-weight summer the first of May.

Over this underwear she would fasten a pair of worn corsets. They were habit; they gave her no support—unless moral. The part that was supposed to cup nicely under full breasts yawned out like two empty birds' nests. But we children did not think of her as pathetic in corsets that might have fitted forty years earlier. She was very much just right the way she was! Then came two cotton undershirts and a long cotton dress of drab print. Surely the posy clusters on the dress bloomed there in the sixties. When

fully dressed, Maw looked tinier than ever, wrapped in her great whirl of long skirts.

Next she would pour a little warm water from the teakettle into a tin basin and wash her face and hands. At last would come the complaining process of combing her thin, streaked hair. After removing her flannel nightcap with its ludicrous crocheted border, she would comb out the strands, wet her hands, smear them with tar soap, standing at the long, gilt-edged mirror, smooth her fingers over her head, plaster the hair in place, and gather the ends into a sad little knot at her neck. "Drat this hair," she would say. "Drat it. What's a body to do about it?" And since she never had any use for white hair, she kept hers a streaky tan with tar soap. She took no pride in age and was ashamed that she had allowed the years to go by and add against her without grabbing them by the tail feathers and holding them back.

Her clothes, her hair, her hands always smelled of tar soap mingled with the odor of sage smoke.

It was time now to prepare breakfast; the stove had gathered heat, the teakettle was singing, the door had been opened and flies buzzed in the sun slanting against the step. And Maw had finished her morning grumbling over the Seth Thomas clock. She could never understand why it didn't run without incident even though it had come across the plains with her and survived a Montana mining camp fire when the Wadams home burned. She would peer at the clock, finding it silent as time itself.

"Drat the thing," she would say, "ain't it ever going to work?" Opening the long door of the timepiece, she would flutter a feather among the rusty entrails and along the chains that held the weights, filming them with oil. Maw always kept the feather, mesh down, in a small pot of kerosene beside the clock, to be reached with knowing hands at a moment's notice. But why did she bother? What difference did the clock make? We went to bed with the birds, got up with the sun, ate when our stomachs said eat, and lived the hours between more or less as we wished them.

Now she steeped gunpowder tea, and by the time we children were up and dressed, breakfast was on the table: stewed dried apples that usually tasted of mold, and stale bread toasted on top of the stove, where salt had been sprinkled to keep the bread from sticking, or browned hard in the oven—Boston toast—and covered with cream gravy made with salt side drippings. At every meal and often in between there was saucered tea for all.

Before seating herself with groans, Maw would put a few drops of Haarlem oil into a spoonful of sugar and swallow the mixture for her general health and well-being. The taste always turned her face upside down. Maw and Gramp's horses were the only Haarlem oil takers on the ranch.

At table now and again we were given a short lesson in manners. Maw taught us to saucer and sip our tea as Thomas Jefferson had done over a hundred years earlier. And though her language was often crude, she taught us to say, "I have a grand sufficiency," when our little bellies were full.

And then we'd take the well-beaten trail with Maw that led back into the past; back to days of covered wagon, mining camp, or Montana ranch. With her elbows resting on the table, she would sip tea from her saucer, swish it around in her mouth, swallow it, and say, "Lou was just so-o-o high, Dick so-o-o high,

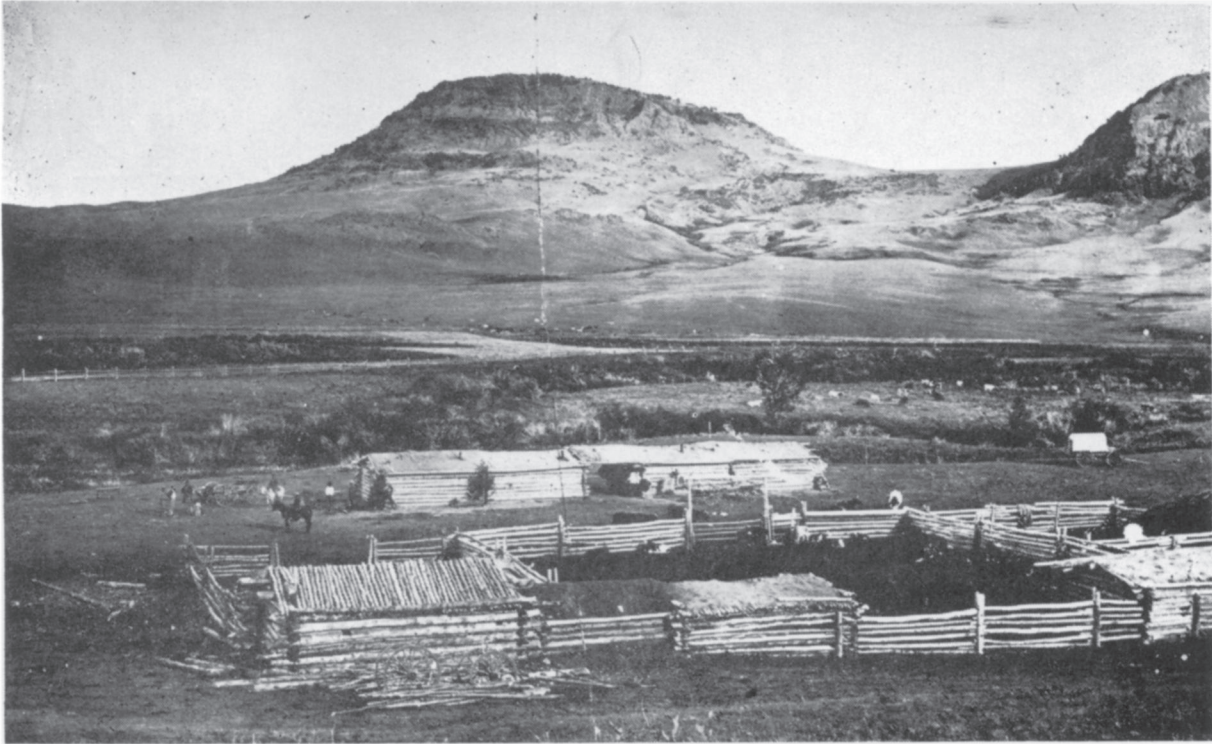
and Pene . . ." or "Dunc was just so-o-o high, Alice not born yet." Then she would move into her story, her face set, her milky eyes looking through us into the severe, relentless past. Here we'd stay with her until our mosquito bites brought us back to the present.

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Rainy days were darkly closed in, smudgy, and exciting. Maw would boil sassafras tea for us or give us slippery elm bark to chew. Sometimes she read from a big book of poetry with coarse gray leaves which held a somber poem about each day bringing us closer to the grave. Whose grave? we once asked, and her explanation left us quiet.

A special treat on rainy days was the opportunity to smoke evergreen needles in corncob pipes. We would first dry the needles in the oven and then grind them. Maw pretended we needed the pine smoke for a cough and head cold, and we pretended we had the cough and head cold so that we could sit around the little stove and smoke while she sang us crude songs in a high, dry voice, beating out time with a spoon against her teacup—songs she had learned somewhere along the years and that we have never heard since.

And there was also the cabinet and whatnot to keep us interested on wet days. They held treasures out of Maw's first life. Among other things on the whatnot was a milk glass hen on a milk glass nest, the nest holding a tiny gold heart that had belonged on a daughter's necklace. But the greatest treasures were in the six-foot cabinet that stood, along with Maw's huge bed, against the back wall. Its many slanting shelves held Montana gold specimens from the quartz mine discovered by Pap Wadams at Bannack in '62. The cabinet also displayed the first chicken hatched on Pap's Montana ranch. It had four legs, four wings, and only one head. Maw had preserved it in alcohol and then dried it. Bill, my twin, once said to her after examining the dried remains, "It was an



A typical early Montana homestead-ranch, location unknown, taken by the pioneer "Picture Maker of the Old West," W. H. Jackson, who travelled with the Hayden Survey party of 1869-71. Most homesteads, initially, were nothing more than the crudest type of single shelter; usually a tiny sod-roof cabin or simple lean-to. This one with livestock shelters, corrals and fenced pasture had already grown into a respectable ranch.

awful good start on the ranch, wasn't it, Maw?"

There was a brain coral in the cabinet used as a pincushion to hold a sunburst pin of Montana rubies. And there were a small knife and fork that belonged to some dead member of the family; also a few porcupine quills that, in the long ago, had been pulled from the nose of Old Bob, Maw's shepherd dog, who lived to be twenty-one. There was a fascinating parchment fan that rose from a nose-gay of artificial flowers; the fan had been a gift to Mother on her fourth birthday. And there was a piece of Indian skull—but we children were given no history of this.

No, we were never bored by rain.

In midsummer we ate supper with a smudge at the door to discourage mosquitoes. We ate strange concoctions such as cheese boiled in milk and swallowed in long strings. In Maw's frugality no food was wasted, and I shudder now to think what we must have eaten in our ignorance and innocence—and in her half-blindness. And, as always, we would return to her first life when one or two

of her five children—Sarah Parthenia, Richard Marlin, Lucy Priscilla, Duncan McDonald Feeley, or Alice Velnette—were just so-o-o high.

As darkness gathered, the door was barred with ceremony. I don't know whether it was barred against man, beast, or both. Maw would soak a stick in water and jam it somehow against the latch so that it would swell from the water and secure the bar. If the house had ever caught fire we would have gone up in smoke and become a part of the wind in the firs. All the while Maw worked on the latch, she complained about the world not loving her. We three children and our mother were the only living creatures who cared at all about her, and if it were not for us, the ants would carry her out the keyhole (she always said this, though she had no keyhole). When we were gone in winter she had no one. Strangely enough, she never spoke with bitterness about the hardships she endured, the deprivation, during the long frozen days and nights of deep snow. She complained only of not being loved. Perhaps pride covered

privation; pride in being able to do something constructive for Gram and Gramp. Each morning, in the dead of winter, they would watch for smoke from her cabin chimney, knowing she must be all right if she could get out of bed and build a fire. And twice a week they drove to her cabin with sleigh and team, carrying supplies. But they did not show Mother's understanding gentleness, or our open easy affection. Gramp was kind, but extremely quiet; Gram was full of unbounded laughter, but quick to anger. So ants would carry Maw out the keyhole . . .

There was an improvised bed along one wall for two of us, but we all three wanted to sleep with Maw and often did. We'd sink down into the great bed which held, besides the four of us, two feather ticks and a straw tick made sweet with dried sprigs of wild mint. We'd stare up into the gathering darkness and listen to Maw talk of her first life while wind moved the great firs, and the chilling yelp of coyote or wail of wolf could be heard, sometimes far, sometimes near; and a few mosquitoes whined over us. Deep in the feather bed, with Maw near and the door secure, we were protected against everything—save mosquitoes.

“STAGING IN MONTANA—Some lady correspondents, who recently reached Montana on the overland coach, gives her impressions of the Rocky Mountain staging in a letter to an Eastern paper. This is what she says: “These stages are towed by four horses, steered by the most elegant young gentlemen ever seen, whose cheeks always glow with the blush of youth and innocence, and whose eyes are always on the alert for holes in the road instead of the young ladies in the stage. Some portions of the road is along hillsides, and the precipice below is very frightful to many women’s nerves, and they turn pale and grasp out: ‘Oh! driver, do be careful!’ and the like, but he goes on his winding

When we said good-by to Maw each fall, her loneliness spread out and followed us. “I’ll set the table for you every meal till you come back. Every meal. And I’ll talk to you like you’re right here. But ants’ll carry me out the keyhole . . .”

Maw completed her duty. And when she proved up on her homestead, a new cabin was built for her close by the other dwellings on the main ranch. But the new house held no spell for us children. The joy and the dream had ended. We had outgrown her world. At the age of eleven and twelve we were bored with covered wagons, the gold of mining camps, and children just so-o-o high. We were weary of tales told many times. Even the four-legged chicken held no spell. We laughed at Maw and avoided her when we could. She would stand on her doorstep and call to us, but we did not answer unless Mother made us go to her. We entered a new world, while she remained in hers, pathetic and alone.

We had a grand sufficiency.

¹ Mr. and Mrs. Wilson Wadams were in the early wave of immigrants to Bannack in 1862. Wilson Wadams (Pap) died in Beaverhead county on Sept. 6, 1902. His wife (Maw) Mary Jane, outlived him by almost two decades, but was buried by his side in May, 1921.

way. One lady asked the driver what he would do if the stage went down the bank? ‘Roll down,’ said he. ‘Do you ever have any accidents on this road?’ said she. ‘Sometimes, but not often,’ was the reply. ‘What do the people say that get hurt?’ ‘Nothing, for we knock them on the head at once,’ was the answer, which did not at all reassure the lady.”

(Helena Weekly Herald, November 7, 1872)

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