

MONTANA EPISODES

COUNTRY KIDS in CHICAGO

Montana's First Delegation to the National 4-H Club Congress, 1925

by Marie MacDonald

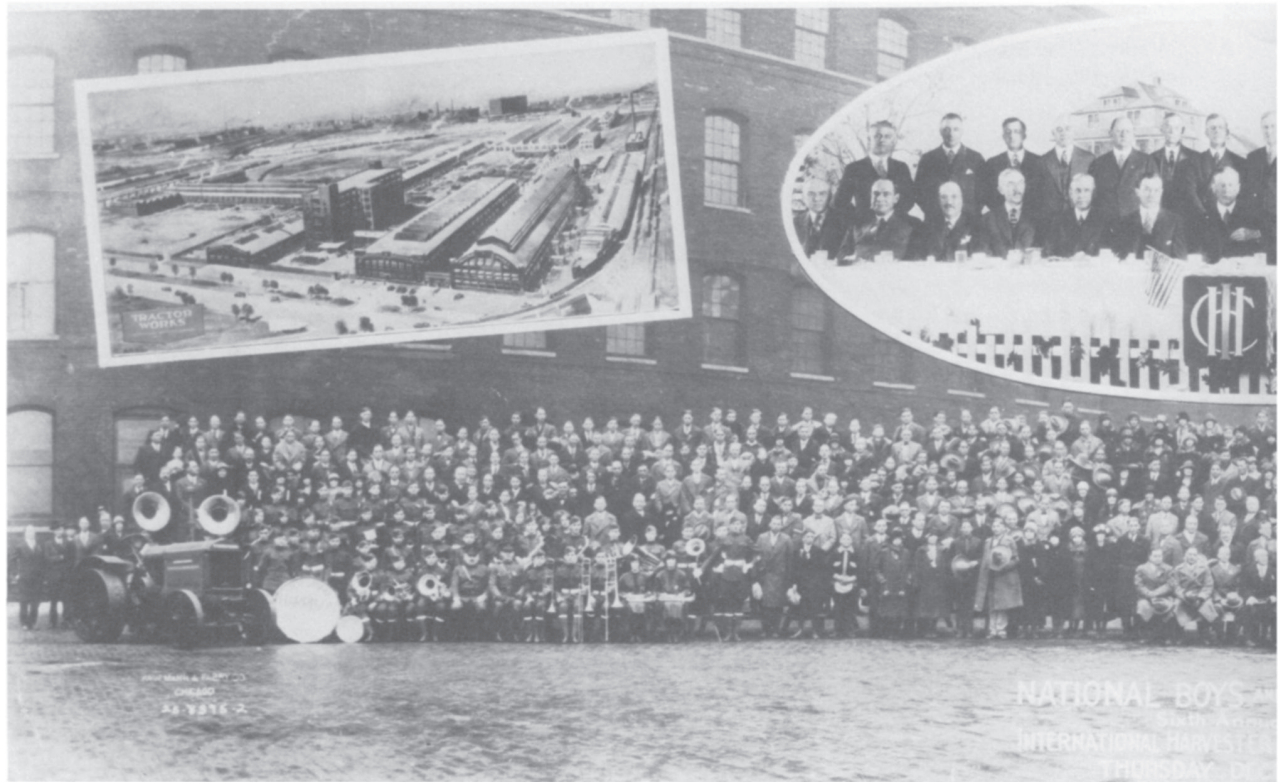
Hicks! Hayseeds! Honyockers! The words are dated slang, barely understandable in modern America. City kids once used the words to insult country kids. Nowadays you cannot tell whether people are rural or urban residents. Their clothes are bought in the same stores, influenced by the same magazines, movies, and television.

But until the automobile revolutionized life in these United States in the 1920s, country kids were recognizably different from city kids. Not for us the smart ribbed knee hose, bare knees and oxfords they wore. With miles to travel to school in Montana's savage winters, we wore long-legged, long-sleeved knitted underwear that bunched under our long wool stockings. Our shoes laced high over our ankles. The stockings were hitched by garters to a shoulder harness which fitted over our undershirts but under our

drawers and slips. Our mothers made our dresses and sent to Wards, Sears or Savage (their Minnesota-based rival until the Depression) for our coats. Except for shoes, we seldom tried on clothes in a store. Shoes we bought at our general store and post office, reachable by horse and buggy.

Twice a year, perhaps, our families made an expedition to Great Falls or another city, going in by train and staying a few days, glorying in the lighted streets and the glass-windowed shops, and going to movies. Seeing only a couple of movies a year, we had not the worldly knowledge of town dwellers. They went to shows regularly and observed not only newsreels of great men and faraway places, but also the elegancies of Gloria Swanson, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Rudolph Valentino, Clara Bow.

Henry Ford and his competitors changed all that.



International Harvester's gift photograph of all the delegates to the 4-H Club National Congress in 1925.

Beginning in the 1920s almost everyone got an automobile. With an automobile, we could get to Great Falls often, every month except in winter, to buy ready-made things. The crossroads stores disappeared; the small towns decayed. Then came radio and eventually television, homogenizing our clothes, our houses, our accents, our ideas.

Meanwhile the Agricultural Extension Service and especially the 4-H clubs were at work. Their original purpose was to improve agricultural techniques. Their purposes enlarged to include improving food, clothing, the home and the community.

Boys' and girls' "corn clubs," started in Montana in 1911 by railroad builder James J. Hill, evolved into 4-H clubs, nationally sponsored, for better livestock, poultry and crop growing. Soon came sewing, canning and cooking clubs, home beautification and consumer education clubs. The clubs held fairs, summer camps, judging contests, state conferences, and finally national congresses.

In 1923 Margaret Bennett of Fergus County won a Montgomery Ward trip to the 4-H Club Congress in Chicago. Montana was then considered so remote and interesting that Margaret and her chaperone, the Assistant State Club leader, were asked to stand up and be recognized. They sang "Montana" to the Congress.

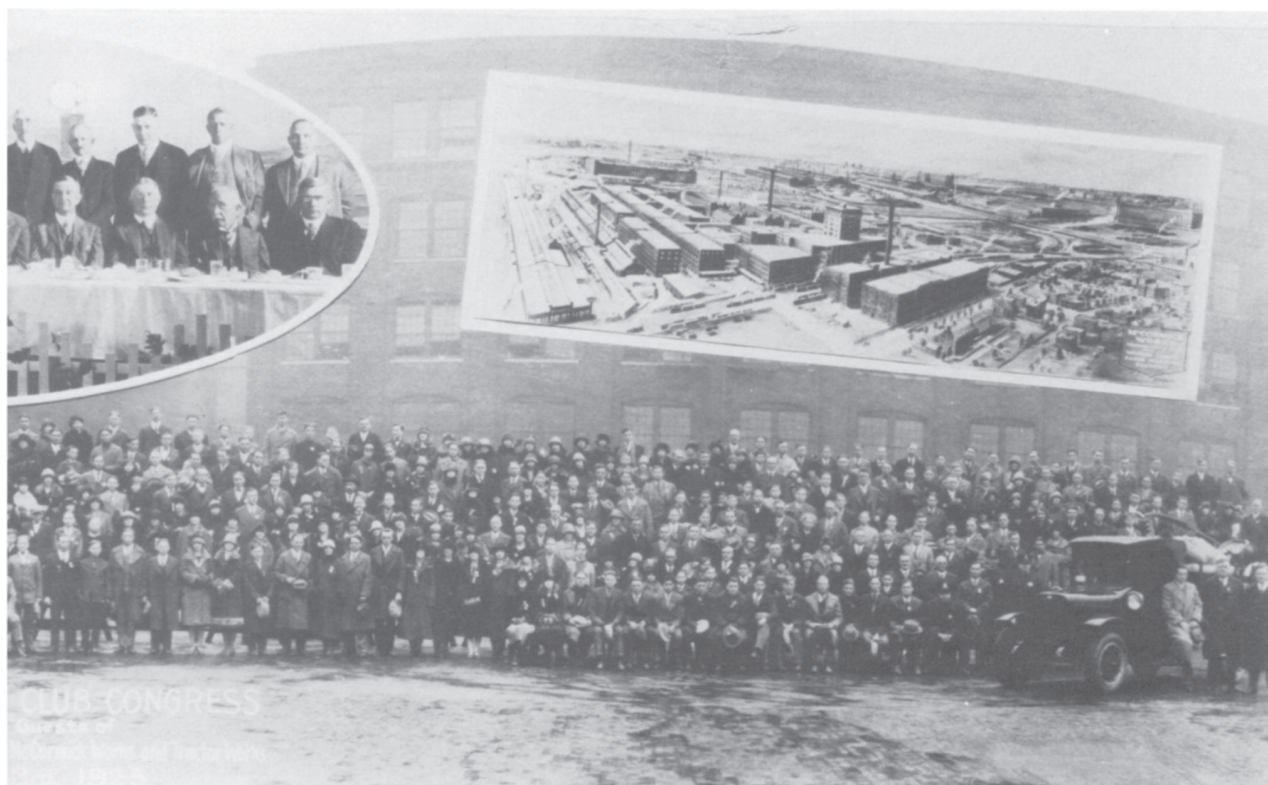
Two years later, Montana sent its first full delegation to the Congress. The Chicago Milwaukee railroad furnished free transportation for the three out-

standing 4-H members and the county agent from each of the counties through which the line passed. Altogether twenty-two boys, six girls, nine county agents, and the State Club leaders, Charles Potter and Doris Ingram, were on the Pullman car that the Milwaukee provided.

I was of the group, the youngest and probably the least sophisticated, sharing a life-enlarging experience which has come to thousands of others. Very few could have been as surprised by the honor as I was.

Sometime in the fall of 1925, as I was adjusting to my first year of high school and to Highwood, population 250, a letter came saying that because of my record in three years of 4-H, I had won a free trip to Chicago. Mother was staggered; she did not think I should go. Even Dad, usually permissive, was not certain how to react. As for me, I scarcely believed what the letter plainly said until *The River Press* arrived and there on the front page was a news item that Earl Deck of Fort Benton, Delbert Myrick of Square Butte, and Marie Peterson of Waltham were the winners in Choteau County of the trips so generously donated by the Milwaukee.

The Highwood merchants made up a purse of \$25.00 for me to spend "as I pleased" in Chicago. This last was the overwhelming, decisive fact. Mother ordered a new hat, called a "chapeau," and winter coat for me. I got another sweater and skirt and also a new pair of shoes (chose sensible ones)



and a shingle haircut in Great Falls.

We delegates who lived along the Harlowton-Great Falls branch line met the main body of the group when we woke up beyond Baker, after actually sleeping in a bed on a train. Mr. Paugh, our county agent, introduced us to Miss Doris Ingram, the girls' chaperone and mentor. A jovial young woman, Miss Ingram set about teaching us manners. She told us that dinner was the evening meal; that all that silver in the diner and at the banquets was to be used from the outer layer inward; that the finger bowl was not drinking water. We learned how to have our berths up, what the various basins were for in the ladies' room, how to tip the waiter, the porter, and the red-cap. Sunday morning we chugged into Chicago and the feminine contingent was lodged in the La Salle Hotel, very new and shining. For safety's sake, the males were put somewhere else.

Immediately we began sixteen-hour days of seeing and learning. We marched in a troop to everything, beginning right after breakfast and ending at midnight following some banquet at a major hotel: the Congress, the Stevens, the Blackstone.

Our first expedition was to the Field Museum of Natural History. For more than fifty years I have measured museums against that mind-opening place. I have never forgotten the dinosaur skeletons there.

Next we went to the Chicago Art Institute, boys and girls together, and encountered inside the door the figure of a man, larger than life-size, wearing only a fig leaf. Farther on there were paintings of plump ladies lolling naked on cushions, breasts and deltas proudly bared. It would be hard to describe to the present generation how prudish we were, how modest and embarrassed. After my first startled stare, I looked down so steadily that I could scarcely make my way. My companions were equally abashed, even the college boys, of whom there were a few.

Monday we spent at the International Exposition and Livestock Show and saw immense hogs, manured cattle, the best corn and wheat in the world. The best wheat, the grand sweepstakes winner, was from Stillwater County, Montana, which made us very proud.

There were halls filled with 4-H exhibits: canned fruits and canned vegetables, each bean in perfect proportion and placement, and beautiful garments, the best from the best of the seamstresses of forty-eight states.

May Oberfell of Sidney placed third nationally for the best complete girls' outfit. She also modelled an evening dress in the style show and placed ninth. Francis Schartz of Plevna was second in the competition for ability in judging canned goods. For the boys, Chalmer Wiseman of Hillcrest got a first place for white dent corn, Lawrence Borer of Forsyth was sec-

ond, Paul Spears of Hillcrest, third, Guy Byerly and Lawrence Byerly of Ingomar placed fourth and fifth. For yellow dent corn, Herbert Zwisler of Park City got a second and Ray Kinkade of Forsyth got a fourth.

While Sears Roebuck entertained the boys, Montgomery Ward gave the girls lunch and each one of us a set of fine scissors. Then guides showed us how orders, orders such as those we sent in from Highwood, Montana, were assembled, packaged and shipped. In the great mail room were row upon row of open mail sacks, arranged by state, region and town, methodically being filled with the aid of conveyer belts.

Fleischman's Yeast took us through their plant, where we saw the yeast being stirred in round, room-size vats. In another factory we saw molten iron being poured into molds. International Harvester lunched and photographed the entire Congress and sent each of us a print two feet long. I still have the picture, framed, but cannot now be sure which is mine among the thousand and some faces. Only the Texans, who came equipped with big Stetsons, are recognizable.

Our expedition to the stockyards was like a nightmare. Here a man stood with a huge mallet, facing an endless succession of steers coming out of a chute. When a steer reached him, he struck it squarely between the eyes. As the animal sank to the concrete floor, another man slit its throat, and still another man caught its hind leg in a chain which carried the body on to the next stage of butchery. The men wore rubber boots, wading in blood. Of course the blood was drained off systematically, to be turned into fertilizer and other things. Nothing, said our guides, is wasted here except the bawl.

The awful smell of the stockyards seemed to hang over the city, along with industrial smoke and late autumn clouds. In the middle 1930s, when the stockyards burned up, I felt a moment of thankfulness.

My strongest single impression was of how many people there were in the world, judging by Chicago. People jammed the downtown streets in the mornings and again leaving work in the late afternoons. Everywhere they seemed crowded and unhappy.

A subway ride did not surprise me. It was as I expected it to be from reading, that is, fast and dark and not a bit interesting. Elevators in skyscrapers were different than the ones in Great Falls; dropping a dozen floors in seconds, they gave us a kind of seasickness. But we loved the escalators in Marshall Field's. They were fun, like a carnival ride.

The State Street stores seemed as big as hayfields back home. So many stores! So many things to buy! Fashions, that autumn of 1925, featured glossy black and bright green. Because the best-selling book of the



Detail from the 4-H Congress picture on pages 74-75. The Montana delegation is included in this area—do you recognize someone there?

year was Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat*, we saw examples everywhere, felts shaped like inverted vases, coming down just along women's eyebrows, cuttingly green.

One afternoon we went to a red plush and gilt theatre where we saw vaudeville acts along with a Norma Talmadge movie.

Every evening we ate in some chandeliered banquet room. The Pullman Porters entertained us, as did other famous singers and comedians. Then after a dinner of several courses, corporation officials made speeches, telling us farm youngsters that we were the future of our wonderful country.

Inwardly we accepted the responsibility they said was ours. Certainly, after that week, after seeing the

richness and complexity of the outside world, we were never again the same. We had gotten used to finger bowls and to grapefruit with a cherry for breakfast, confronted a raw oyster in mixed company, learned that nakedness was Art, sat at table with captains of American business. We were never again country kids.

Marie MacDonald, former librarian in Glendive, Montana, and for ten years (1969-1979) a member of the Montana Historical Society's Board of Trustees, is the author of *Before Barbed Wire* (1964) and *Glendive: The History of a Montana Town* (1972). In retirement she splits her time between eastern Montana and Lompoc, California, but retains her life-long interest in Montana's past.