

M Montana Episodes

Graduation Party—1929

by Jo Measure



The author,
Laura "Jo"
Forhan, in 1929

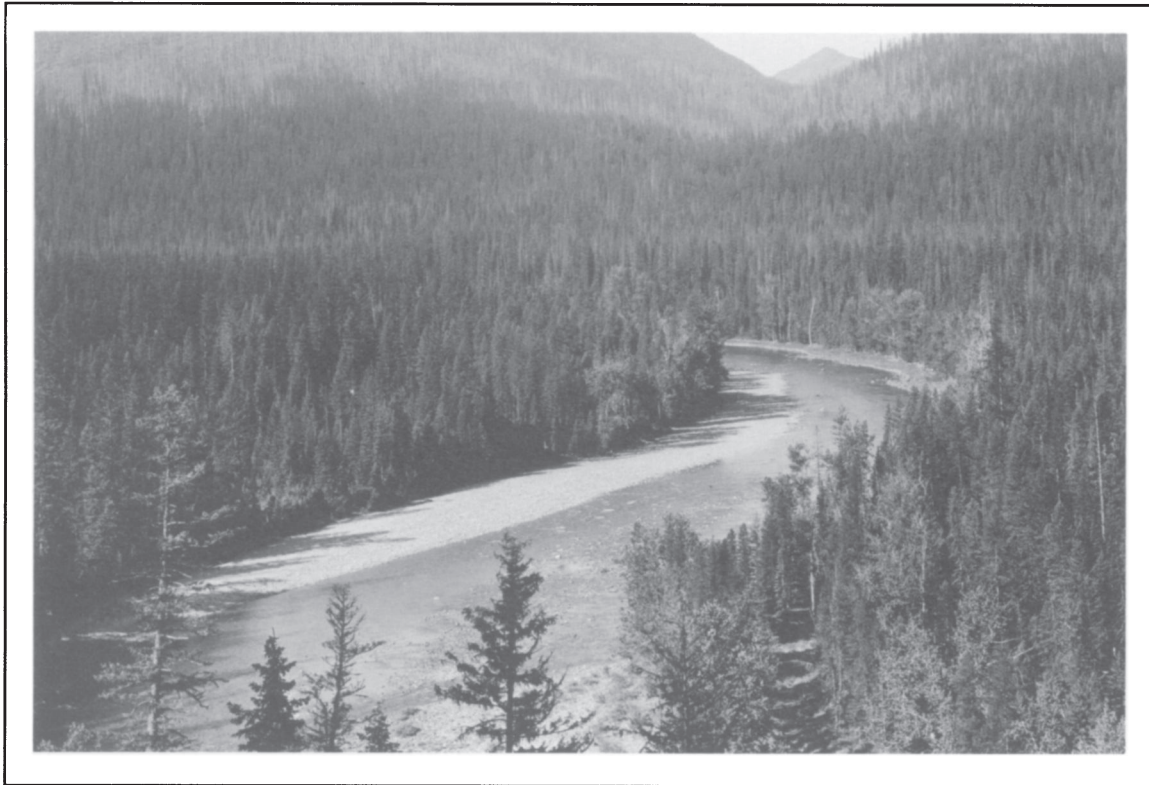
High school graduation parties are memorable affairs. I didn't attend the traditional party and dance, but I did have a memorable experience—an unorthodox graduation party—an introduction to wilderness. The agonies have long faded, but the ecstasy remains and beckons for renewal.

Four of us, two other senior girls, our class advisor, Grace Baldwin, and I, backpacked 125 miles into regions now known as the Bob Marshall and the Great Bear Wilderness areas in northwest Montana.

All through our senior year, the four of us had worked together putting out the *Flathead Arrow*, the school's weekly paper. Several times during late evening sessions in the *Arrow* office or in weekend sessions in her apartment, Grace related incidents about a ten-day hike she and another woman had made in 1921 after they graduated from college in Missoula. They had backpacked 150 miles from Missoula to Whitefish over little-used forest service trails, many of which were still under snow in June. The trip was one of the highlights of her life, and she spoke of it in such glowing terms, that we, too, became enthused about the prospects of a similar journey.

As graduation approached and our enthusiasm mounted, Grace hinted that she would lead us on a similar trip into the wilderness area to and beyond Spotted Bear. It wasn't hard to obtain parental consent. Grace was highly respected in the community and a frequent visitor and dinner guest in our home.

Courtesy Jo Measure, Kalispell, Montana



Courtesy USDA, Forest Service

South Fork River in 1926, looking up stream from Ranger View

After graduation my two friends and I would all go our separate ways. Ruth Knoble had just won the national chemistry essay contest and had her choice of any college in the country. She chose the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Mildred Proctor planned to go to the state Normal College in Dillon, Montana, and I had won a scholarship to the University of Montana, Missoula. We looked forward to the challenge of the future but were hesitant to break ties with the past. This trip would bridge the gap. It would be a farewell party of sorts.

The week following graduation we assembled gear. Two heaps began growing on the living room floor in Grace's home on Whitefish Lake. One pile consisted of a pup tent, borrowed ponchos, a ground cloth, four knapsacks, and four borrowed pack boards. These became known, not so affectionately, as torture racks. Each rack consisted of two sturdy upright boards held together top and bottom by horizontal cross

pieces. Attached between the cross pieces were wide, adjustable leather shoulder straps. Hip straps helped to distribute the weight of the load between shoulder and hips. Our gear was laced in place through holes bored in each frame. We added chest straps and secured to them our drinking cups and other items frequently needed along the trail.

Our plan was to carry little water. Fresh, pure water was available every few miles along the trail in June. (Believe it or not, giardia and other pollutants were no threat in those days. No one was ever reported to have become ill by drinking water in the wilderness areas.)

Clothing, bedding, and boots were in the second pile. Footwear was of prime importance, but each of us had only one pair of boots. Regretfully, one after another, we eliminated items of clothing we had considered essential. Because of weight and bulk we could allow ourselves just three pairs of socks, one change of underwear (men's

gray-flecked, part-wool, ankle and wrist length, buttoned to the throat and with a buttoned back-flap), and no change of outerwear. Caps, mittens, and a stout jacket were musts.

No one owned a rain jacket, and it rained six of the seventeen days we were out. Ponchos served multiple uses as rain jackets, ground cloths, and bed covers. Our bedrolls consisted of two heavy wool army-issue khaki blankets and five horse blanket pins, three for across the foot and two for the side closure. For pillows we wrapped jackets around our boots and outer clothing, and we slept in our underwear.

We carried neither guns nor fishing gear. The only items that might be used for defense were a sheathed sharp knife and a sheathed sharp hatchet. Before leaving, we outfitted ourselves with sturdy walking sticks, lightweight, but strong. Into the bottom end of each stick we pounded a three-inch nail to a depth of two inches. We cut off

the head and sharpened the shaft to a point. These walking sticks were invaluable for maintaining balance and crossing slippery logs and mossy streambanks. They could have been used to fend off a predator, but we were never threatened.

We had to limit food to lighter, dry types: oatmeal, rice, raisins, desiccated eggs, flour, sugar, salt, tea, dried peas, prunes, dried apples, and bouillon cubes. Our only canned food consisted of two small cans of Carnation milk which we hoarded. Freeze-dried food, indeed most dried foods as we know them today, were not available then. Powdered milk would have been a blessing.

When we left Whitefish on June 9, 1929, each girl staggered under fifty-nine pound packs. Grace's pack with medical supplies, knife, hatchet, maps, flashlight, and batteries weighed seventy-two pounds. She was small and the big pack dwarfed her. Mine nearly strangled me. It was hard to breathe with such a load on my shoulders.

My father drove us the nineteen miles from Grace's home to the Coram Ranger Station where we filed our plans with the ranger, and he informed us of trail conditions and fire rules. After that we were on our own for most of the next seventeen days. We had hoped that our packs would lighten as we consumed the food, but near constant rain the first few days saturated our clothes and some of our gear so we were probably carrying even heavier loads.

Whenever we took off our packs to rest our shoulders, a strange phenomenon occurred. Our arms and shoulder blades flapped uncontrollably as if preparing for aerial flight. It was the muscles' response to sudden relief after straining against a heavy load. Carrying those packs was agony. To maintain our balance on the upgrade we leaned into the hill; on the downgrade, we leaned away from it. Just donning one of those packs required a special technique. The easiest method seemed to be to bully the



Courtesy Jo Measure, Kalispell, Montana

Grace Baldwin shouldering her pack at the Spotted Bear Ranger Station.

load up to an elevated place, about shoulder or waist high, slip a strap over one shoulder, then ease the other shoulder into the remaining strap, taking care not to be overbalanced in the weight-shift.

The first day we covered only five miles. Great Northern Mountain (altitude 8,705 feet) towered above us on our left, but we paid little heed to it or to the sun glinting off Stanton Glacier on its flank. That day we just concentrated on putting one foot ahead of the other until darkness and a rain storm overtook us. Creeks had flooded their banks and sogged the surrounding lowlands. The driest place that night was on a bridge over an unnamed stream, probably Emery Creek. The one-lane wooden bridge was narrow and partly rotted with logs thrown along its edges to define the outer limits.

We were too exhausted to build a fire and eat. After protecting two bedrolls inside one poncho, we set

up the pup tent on the bridge, squeezed two bedrolls and ourselves into it and fell asleep. Neither the steady drum beat of the rain on the poncho and pup tent, nor the humming of the hungry mosquitoes kept us awake. There was no traffic; the road was primitive and little used except as a supply route for the forest service camps upriver, which brought once-a-week traffic, quite often by mule train. Nothing could keep us from sleep.

Next morning we awoke with Grace bending over us with tin cups of steaming hot tea. Nothing ever tasted so good or was more appreciated. We were ravenously hungry, stiff, and sore. Once awake it didn't take long to work out the kinks in aching muscles. Grace fixed a good breakfast of hot oatmeal with raisins, scrambled eggs, camp bread, and more tea. That gave us renewed energy to face another day. Churning, lead-colored clouds still

hung low and threatening.

The second day we made better mileage, sloshing through about seven miles of mud over washboard trails. By nightfall, shivering cold and even more stiff and sore than the night before, we set up camp in Felix Basin.

By the third day we had resigned ourselves to aches, pains, rain, and mosquitoes. We even began to see the humor in our situation and composed silly chanteys as we slogged along. That night we camped near a little lake—Black Lake, I called it. When I saw it I recalled a line from one of Ethel Romig Fuller's poems: "Only a dream could partake of the thin black of this lake." Descending clouds smothered the mountains before darkness enveloped us. By morning, Black Lake was lost under a soft white mist. A long-legged great blue heron, silhouetted dream-like against the whiteness, bobbed in and out of the mist as it searched for an early breakfast along the lake's shore.

At night we bathed in icy streams, then put on clean underwear, before sliding into our bedrolls. Every night we washed our socks and the next morning hung them on our pack boards to dry as we hiked along.

If the next day's weather looked promising, we weighted the arms and legs of our underwear with stones and submerged them in the stream to let the rushing water do the laundry. The next morning we removed the stones, wrung out the underwear, then fastened them by the shoulders to the tops of our packs to dry as we hiked along. What a weird picture we would have presented to any onlookers, underwear arms and legs flailing in the wind!

We had been hiking nearly due south in the valley between two mountain ranges, the Flathead Range on our left (east) and the Swan Range on our right (west). Gradually we were climbing toward the Continental Divide where the Flathead River has its source. Mountains on either side rose to between 3,000 feet and 4,000 feet above us. Snow still lingered on the high north-facing slopes and in many protected pockets lower down. Often we were in sight or hearing range of the river. In places the water was swift and noisy as it tumbled over rapids; on the level stretches it glided noiselessly.

Spruce, pine, fir, and hemlock grew in abundance on the mountain flanks; and along the creeks and rivulets coming down

to the river, chin-high devil's club and stinging nettle flourished. Graceful curling fronds of ferns grew knee high. Mushrooms of numerous varieties were everywhere, pushing themselves up through mounds of decaying leaf mold. We were sure of only the morels. They were few and we gathered them greedily for delicious additions to our scrambled eggs.

At the higher elevations fir and spruce gave way to scrubby pine and an abundance of shrubs and bushes. Deer and elk signs were everywhere. We saw no elk, but often saw a shy doe and her fawn, or fawns, eyeing us from their shadowy sanctuaries. Buttercups and glacier lilies often bloomed on the edges of receding snowbanks. Trillium, both white and lavender, grew along the edges of slow-moving streams. Serviceberry bushes were beginning to flaunt showy white blossoms.

Birds were everywhere—jays, crows, flickers, nuthatches, juncos, and occasionally a robin or chickadee. At higher elevations, and especially along limestone escarpments, we often saw eagles soaring, then diving and returning to their aerie above us with screaming, squirming victims in their claws. Squirrels chided us endlessly for disturbing their peace. Occasionally we flushed a ruffed grouse or fool hen, and it would startle us with the strangest of sounds to be heard in deep wilderness, a sound not unlike a gasoline engine running at full throttle.

From the Coram Ranger Station to the Spotted Bear Ranger Station (roughly sixty-five miles) we had seen no one. We planned to arrive at Spotted Bear on the sixth day. As we neared the station, the country became more level with less vegetation. Here the Spotted Bear River, coming down from the northeast, emptied into the south fork of the Flathead River and became a great churning body of



Courtesy Jo Measure, Kailispell, Montana

Ruth Knoble, Mildred Proctor, and Grace Baldwin (from left) fueling up for the next leg of their journey

water running muddy and burdened with debris brought down from the higher elevations and sources of both rivers. As we neared the ranger station, Grace reminded us we were young ladies and suggested we act and look like them instead of sourdough prospectors. There wasn't much we could do to look like ladies. I shudder now to think of the image we must have presented: stringy, dirty hair; sun- and weather-burned faces; dirty, broken fingernails; clothes smudged with grease, smoke, and dirt; caked muddy boots; and untidy packs. A very unlady-like group.

Spotted Bear Ranger Station was a small log structure in a large clearing. It was the Flathead forest service's upriver headquarters. There were several small buildings and one or two army type tents, presumably used as sleeping quarters for the wranglers and packers. A couple of packers were readying their mules with a load of supplies to take to camps up the Spotted Bear River. Horses were corralled nearby. Here horses and mules were a most valued commodity. Aside from shank's mare, these animals were the only form of transportation to the wilderness beyond.

Barney Mendenhall, the ranger at Spotted Bear, was prepared for our coming. He and about six or eight young foresters who worked there prepared a great welcome for us—a dinner of meat, potatoes, gravy, canned peaches—and even pie. That night they serenaded us with guitar music, song, and tales of the wild outdoors. We camped along the Spotted Bear River, a short distance from the ranger station, under a starry sky. The next morning they served us a delicious breakfast of flapjacks with butter and syrup, ham, eggs, and coffee. When we left they sent us upriver with a pound of coffee and a large chunk of cheese. They had offered to give us bacon, but

Ruth Knoble, Grace Baldwin, and Mildred Proctor (from left) preparing the evening meal

withdrew the offer when they decided that the smell of the bacon might attract bears.

Our next destination was Dean Creek and Falls, Twin Creeks, Limestone Cave and cabin, and the long line of limestone cliffs beyond it. From there on it would be Pentagon, Pentagon Mountain, Trilobite Peak, and, if good fortune held, as far as Schaeffer Ranger Station over the Continental Divide and into the middlefork of the Flathead River drainage area.

At Limestone, smoke-chasers Charley Shaw and Roy Carey fed us again. Such good food! They were happy to see us, and we to see them. Charley related the marvels of Limestone Cave located above his smoke-chaser's cabin. He said water gushed out of the mouth of the cave in the spring and inside was a deep lake where blind fish swam. A few years later I related this story to my major professor, Robert T. Young of the biology department of the University of Montana. He wanted to organize an expedition to authenticate the claim for he thought it most unusual for fish to live in a cave so near the top of the Continental Divide. I don't know whether Professor Young followed through, but I know he did consult with Professor Jesse P. Rowe of the geology department about the geology and possible source of water. The blind fish represented a puzzle they both wanted to explore.

When we left Limestone, Charley and Roy presented us with

a pan of homemade fudge for our trip upriver. We were running very low on food, and it was most welcome.

From there on we gained elevation rapidly as we followed the Spotted Bear River. One night we camped under the long, high ridges of a limestone formation. During the night, something startled me awake, though I know not what. There was no sound or rustle of bushes, but the night sky was alive with stars so bright they almost seemed to pop. Poised almost directly over the head of a snag on the top of the cliff above us was one brilliant star (maybe the planet Venus). For about four hours I watched it in its nightly trek across the star-studded sky, moving almost imperceptibly to the right toward the horizon. The whole visible universe above me ebbed and pulsed. These surely were the crown jewels of the King of Kings. I shivered in my sleeping bag as a mini-universe of atoms, protons, and neutrons ebbed and pulsed within me. I, too, was a child of God. Too awed I could not go back to sleep.

Millions of years ago this land lay under a sea rich in limestone, which encouraged the proliferation of many forms of limestone-shelled creatures. One of these, the trilobite, which thrived during the Cambrian geological era, was especially numerous in the Belt Series exposed at Trilobite Peak, and I had wanted to bring back a fossil trilobite. But we never did get to Trilobite Peak.



Courtesy Jo Measure, Kalispell, Montana

We ran out of food several miles before our goal. All we had left was about a pound of rice. No salt, no tea, nothing but huge appetites. We had to turn back. When we reached Spotted Bear Ranger Station, a crew was preparing a forest service truck to drive to the Coram Ranger Station for more supplies. We were in luck. They offered us a ride back to our starting point where my folks picked us up at the ranger station.

We were reluctant to leave the wilderness, but we couldn't take it back with us. Instead, we took back memories and have hoarded them ever since. We were so happy to be going home to plenty of food; soft, warm, dry beds; HOT BATHS; clean clothes; and no mosquitoes. The agony blurred. The ecstasy remained and beckons for renewal. During those seventeen days in the wilderness—often exhausted, wet, cold, and sometimes hungry—none of us suffered from colds or headaches.

Following our "big trip," each of us prepared for college. Ruth had a summer job in Glacier National Park, Mildred scavenged odd jobs,

and I spent the summer furiously ripping apart and re-making hand-me-downs for my college wardrobe. These were depression years. In the fall we went our separate ways.

Ruth earned a degree in library science and married an aeronautical engineer; Mildred taught several years before marrying a widowed high school principal with several children. I graduated from the University of Montana with a degree in biology and enough credits (minus a thesis) for a master's degree. I married Ambrose Measure, whom I had known since high school. An ardent outdoorsman, he is probably the longest practicing attorney in Montana today.

Of the original four, Ruth and I are the only survivors. Ruth is deciphering Mayan tombstone hieroglyphics while I hike, garden, and occasionally write.

I will never be able to fully thank Grace for what she did for me. She loved the wilderness no less than Bob Marshall did, and she taught me to love and appreciate it, too. She was an artist and a poet with the soul of both.

She heard music in the gurgling of water under ice, felt drama in the power of a gathering storm, and saw art in the swooping arc of a bird in flight.

When Grace was a student at the University of Montana about 1919 she fell in love with Frank Hutchinson, a forestry student. They lost touch with each other after graduation, but she had an abiding faith that they would meet again. Fifty years later they found each other through a University of Montana alumni publication. He was the head of the forestry department at a college in New Zealand, and she was a college librarian in Idaho. He came back for her. They married and returned to New Zealand, where they lived for many happy years.

She is dead now, but she passed on her love of the world, the wilderness, and its wonders to me. A wonderful gift. Thank you, Grace. *M*

JO MEASURE lives with her attorney husband, Ambrose Measure, in Kalispell, Montana, where they enjoy the outdoors, and she "occasionally scribbles."



Courtesy USDA, Forest Service

Trilobite Lake at Clock Creek in the Bob Marshall Wilderness