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# Montana Episodes

## Isabelle Randall and the “Natives”

by Phyllis Smith

In 1885 young Britishers Isabelle and James Randall traveled by train through the mountains east of Bozeman (right, 1883) to reach their new home in the Gallatin Valley to live, according to Isabelle, “amongst the mountains, the cattle, the Indians, and the grisly bears.”



E. Jay Haynes, photographer, Haynes Foundation Collection, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

While on the train to Montana in fall 1885, the well-born Englishwoman Isabelle Randall studied her fellow passengers in hopes that she could learn something about the new life that awaited her in the Gallatin Valley. One handsome couple in particular took her fancy: he wore high boots with silver spurs, a wide-brimmed white hat, blue shirt, embroidered brown velvet coat, red handkerchief, and lots of silver jewelry; she was ladylike, dressed in a dark, expensive-looking suit. Perhaps the lady

is a rich, eastern debutante and the cowboy has married her for her money, Mrs. Randall mused. Her new husband, James “Jem” Randall, soon brought the news. He had visited the gentlemen’s smoking parlor and learned that the “cowboy” was a French nobleman who owned property in southern Montana and the lady was English.<sup>1</sup>

Like many of their new neighbors in Montana, the Randalls were part of a group of young Britishers—many second- and third-born sons of noble

families and their wives—who in the 1880s streamed out of crowded England bound for adventure in Africa, India, or the United States. Some sought the riches that could not be theirs at home because of the English custom of primogeniture that gave the eldest son right to the family fortune. Others were summarily ordered by their parents to leave home and not return to England until they mended their dissolute ways. A regular allowance from home kept some of these so-called remittance men from worry-

1. Isabelle Randall, *A Lady's Rancho Life in Montana* (London, 1887), 6-7.

2. *Bozeman (Mont.) Avant Courier*, June 26, 1884. After Three Forks relocated in 1908 to be near the railroad, the original townsite was called Old Town.

3. Lyle K. Williams, *Historically Speaking* (Three Forks, Mont., 1976), 46.

4. Robert G. Athearn, *Westward the Briton* (Lincoln, 1953), 110.

ing about money, and whether of serious or wild disposition, most brought with them the condescension that characterized English class relations.

Word had spread throughout Great Britain in the late 1870s by way of travel books and the press about the fine opportunities in the American West for cattle raising and horse breeding. Do not be fooled by the short brown grass covering western high prairies, authors warned prospective stockmen, western grass is more nutritious than Britain's green acres, and besides, the air is pure and champagne dry—even the occasional rains seem dry—and most suitable for healthy herds as well as healthy men. The arrival of the railroad means no more long, disagreeable journeys west by stage, and shipping livestock to market by rail is inexpensive. Do not bother with Colorado or New Mexico, the writers advised. Open range is a thing of the past and the good land is taken up. Montana Territory is the place.

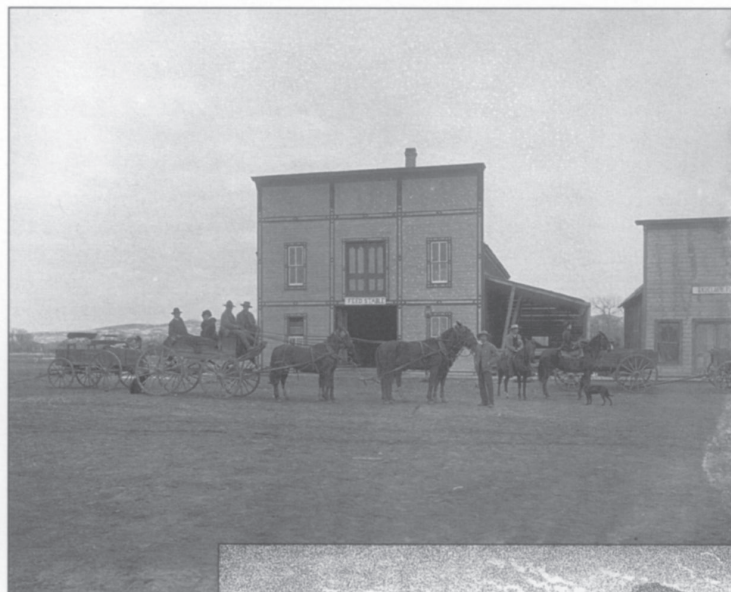
In 1884, near the three forks of the Missouri River, Bridgeville, Montana Territory, became an English colony almost overnight. That year four Englishmen—John A. Chater, Everhard Hennager, Lord Duncan T. Hunter, and Major Andrew Cracraft—had bought the Paul and Hanley Hotel in Bridgeville for \$10,000. Practiced at assessing rangeland, these would-be British horse breeders purchased 700 nearby acres from James Smart for a dazzling \$18,000 and more land

near Clarkston. By the time they finished negotiations with the Northern Pacific Railroad, they owned 7,000 acres of land surrounding Bridgeville. They had spent about \$50,000, a sum that did not go unnoticed by their American neighbors. The new landowners registered their business as John A. Chater and Company, and Lord Hunter became its manager. After incorporating a townsite, Hunter called it Three Forks.<sup>2</sup>

John Chater's brother Henry established in 1884 what historical writer Lyle Williams has called the Three Forks area's first dude ranch in the Paul and Hanley Hotel.<sup>3</sup> He negotiated with English families who wanted to be rid of a wayward son

or two, offering to house the young men, teach them about horse breeding, and possibly reform them—for a fee of about \$250 per year. Some fifteen fun-loving, devil-may-care playboys found the prospect of life in the Gallatin Valley to their liking. They filled westbound railcars with trunks, fine saddles, and guns, and loaded livestock cars with high-quality jumpers as if they meant to stay. But they and their fellow immigrants were not settlers in the traditional sense. These British expatriates lived in the area just long enough to gall their hard-working American neighbors with their superior manner.

No doubt "the natives," as the British called the Americans, may



F. Jay Haynes, photographer, Haynes Foundation Collection, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



A year before the Randalls arrived in Montana, several British expatriates had taken up horse breeding and cattle ranching in Bridgeville, near the three forks of the Missouri River, creating an English colony almost overnight. One of them, M. T. Barney, owned the livery stable, pictured above in November 1886. Another, Henry Chater, established the area's first "dude ranch" for the wayward sons of English families in the Paul and Hanley Hotel (right, from Michael A. Leeson, ed., *History of Montana, 1739-1885* [Chicago, 1885], p. 1126).

Isabelle Randall was relieved to find Bozeman (right, early 1880s) a “pretty little town” with an “odd mixture of small wooden villas and imposing brick structures.” Though she appreciated the town and the natural surroundings of the ranch, Mrs. Randall was not so admiring of the people she met in Montana and quickly earned a reputation as a snob.

have been a bit jealous of the newcomers’ easy wealth and leisure. Moreover, settlers from the States felt they could call Indians “the natives” with impunity, but they didn’t like being called “the natives” themselves. Historian Robert Athearn recounts the story of one young English gentleman, at a loss when he discovered he was expected to dine with ranch hands, who was overheard to state that he did not care to eat with “cow servants.” This “compliment” spread from ranch to ranch, and the cowboys experienced much merriment from the retelling of it.<sup>4</sup>

Ten miles east of Three Forks near today’s Manhattan, another British colony flourished for a time. Britishers James Lowndes, Frank Randall, and a fellow immigrant named Moreland incorporated the Moreland Ranch Stock Company on March 20, 1884. The nearby stage stop of Hamilton and the post office soon came to be known as Moreland. By the time Randall’s brother and his new wife Isabelle arrived with their servants in fall 1885, the area was more English than American. Judging from Mrs. Randall’s letters, the two colonies supported some fifty Britishers who hoped to get rich raising cattle and thoroughbred horses.

The Randalls had spent twelve days crossing a very rough Atlantic, stopped briefly to see Niagara Falls, then entrained for Chicago and St. Paul. To her great surprise, Isabelle Randall found Chicago replete with “beautiful shops with quite the



latest Paris fashions.” And St. Paul was the same on a smaller scale, not, as she expected, filled with “Indians and mud huts, gamblers and miners in picturesque costumes, desperadoes with silver-mounted revolvers and bowie-knives.”<sup>5</sup>

As the train passed through the Yellowstone Valley, Mrs. Randall gazed at the passing vivid landscape—the “golden yellow of the grass, the bright red of the brush by the river-side, the blue-black of the masses of pine against the snow, last, and perhaps most beautiful of all, the dazzling white of the snow-mountains, rising up peak above peak into the brilliant blue of this Western sky.” The travelers passed settlements consisting of one store, one saloon, and a log cabin or two. Uncomfortable at the “thought of having the main range of the mighty Rockies over my head” when the train entered the new Bozeman Tunnel, Isabelle Randall was relieved when “the pretty little town” of Bozeman “with its odd mixture of small wooden villas and imposing brick structures” came into view.<sup>6</sup>

After the two-and-one-half-day trip from St. Paul, the Randalls stepped from the train at Moreland on October

23, 1885; Frank was waiting with the buggy. On they drove one more mile to their new home, the Culver Place, built by Englishman John H. Culver in the early 1870s. The ranch house, elegant for its time, had been used ten years before by the Gallatin Valley Female Seminary, a select school for young ladies. Some of its graduates would later meet Isabelle Randall, though not on the best of terms. A victim of her class, a woman who was perhaps of noble birth or one who at least expected to be perceived as such, Mrs. Randall did not know how to interact with anyone who was not highborn.

She received her first American lady caller in the kitchen and did not invite her to sit in the parlor. After all, the visitor was delivering butter at the back door, but apparently, as Isabelle Randall noted in her first letter back home, “They are all *ladies* out here.” The next female visitors merely left their cards as Mrs. Randall escaped upstairs just in time to avoid their social call. She did, however, hear Jem’s description of their heavily rouged faces covered with pearl powder, a practice she erroneously supposed was learned “from the Indians.”<sup>7</sup>

5. Randall, *A Lady’s Rancho Life*, 4.

6. *Ibid.*, 8, 9.

7. *Ibid.*, 18-19.

8. *Ibid.*, 48.

9. *Ibid.*, 71.

10. *Ibid.*, 24.

11. *Ibid.*, 59.

12. *Ibid.*, 70, 75-76.

Ah, for more Englishwomen in the neighborhood, or at least a better class from the States, Isabelle wrote. Shortly before Christmas, the Randalls were invited to a bachelor's ball in Bozeman; Mrs. Randall noted, though, that most of those listed on the ball committee were tradesmen, so, of course, the Randalls could not attend. Needless to say, news of the couple's attitude toward Americans, male and female, spread throughout the Gallatin Valley, and fewer invitations arrived at the Culver Place.

The Morrises, the English servants the Randalls had brought with them from Battersea, did not share their employers' social views. They were invited here for tea and there for supper at American tables. These outings intensified Isabelle Randall's outrage and sense of propriety. "How can anyone keep servants in their place," she wrote, "when the people, whom we associate with, invite them to their homes as equals?"<sup>78</sup>

It was not long before the Morrises left the Culver Place for more agreeable employment, and Mrs. Randall refused to hire Americans to

replace them. "The natives are very queer, independent, and rough; it is no use trying to make them into *servants*, and very disagreeable to have half-educated, ill-mannered sort of people to eat and sit with you; and if you had English ones, the natives would soon make them discontented."<sup>79</sup>

By the end of March Isabelle had taken over all household chores in the seven-room house, stating that she enjoyed the robust work. She learned how to scrub floors with lye; make puddings and buffalo berry jelly; and bake bread, biscuits, and apple tarts. During the winter, she had become philosophical about frozen washbasins in the bedrooms and frozen bread and milk in the kitchen. Indeed, in order to write home to England, she had to defrost her ink bottle. The family laundry was entrusted to a Chinese man in Moreland. Isabelle Randall did a lot of the outside ranch work as well—mending fence, feeding stock, provisioning the stone dairy—because Frank and Jem were gone for days at a time moving horses into the Horseshoe Hills

or driving animals to market. Despite these new burdens, she found time to play her piano and ride her thoroughbred, Daisy, a wedding present from Jem. She pitied those

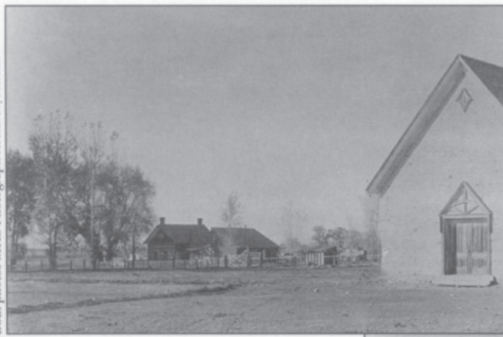
English ladies who spent their days in their parlors wondering what to do.

If Isabelle Randall was lonely, she took comfort in observing nature. The "wind is blowing, the roofs are dripping, the birds twittering and splashing in the puddles, horses galloping about, squealing and kicking up their heels; we have got all the windows open, and it is like spring," she wrote of her first Chinook.<sup>10</sup> On March 23, 1886, she described an eclipse of the sun: "It got pitch dark at 10 A.M., remained so for three-quarters of an hour and blew a hurricane all the time."<sup>11</sup>

The plants and animals of western Montana also captivated the young woman. "The prairie is green and gorgeous with flowers," Isabelle wrote during her first spring in Montana, "especially a little white flower, which grows in bunches and smells delicious." In May, she saw "pink and white ox-eyed daisies . . . growing quite close to the ground (none of the flowers have any stalks), yellow flowers (called prickly pear, really a sort of cactus), small pansies, lenten lilies, and many others. The air is literally scented with them all."<sup>12</sup>

Although most of the British ranchers had little to do with their American neighbors, they had a lot of fun amongst themselves. Dressed in the traditional hunting crimson, they "rode to hounds" seated on their curious pancake saddles; instead of

Both photos MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



The Randalls settled in Moreland, a British colony near present-day Manhattan, in a house built by Englishman John Culver in the early 1870s. Ten years before the Randall's residency, it had served as the Gallatin Valley Female Seminary (above, with the Presbyterian Church). This photograph of the ruins of the "old Culver place" and its stone outbuilding (right) was taken by Merrill G. Burlingame in 1933.





Although most of the Britishers had little to do with their American neighbors, they amused themselves with enthusiasm. They “rode to the hounds” (left), raced horses, and occasionally raised Cain, to the consternation their neighbors.

the bushy-tailed fox, they chased jackrabbits and coyotes across the plains. They also tried lawn tennis and cricket with minimal success. From time to time, the gay blades raced through Moreland or Three Forks on horseback at midnight, shouting, “Let’s wake up the blooming duffers, the Americans.”<sup>13</sup> Residents remembered the day a number of young nobles flew through town shooting at a fat pig, that by the time the fun was over, dropped with fatigue but, miraculously, was not bloodied by bullet holes. The Americans who had fled to their root cellars with the first gunfire were not amused.

Gallatin Valley residents, the natives, did have an opportunity to witness an event at which the British came out the losers. It was a typically American bunco. One afternoon after a romp through the valley, a number of British horsemen spied a whiskery old man seated in a dilapidated pine-board wagon, dressed in clothes that, according to writer Edward B. Reynolds, “hung on him ‘by the Grace of God’ and the lack of a high wind.”<sup>14</sup> His disheveled sorrel could barely stand and looked as if it was ready for the glue factory. Ah, what sport, cried the Britishers. Let’s have a race between the crow bait and

one of ours. The old man was heard to mutter that he would take on all comers. The American observers settled down to enjoy themselves.

The Britishers laid out a four-mile course and started to place their bets with the old man, who had unexpectedly brought from his tattered pockets a number of twenty-dollar gold pieces. Just before the race, another man showed up, announcing to all that he would place his gold certificates on the swaybacked sorrel. Furious betting and side betting ensued. The Americans, however, did not bring out their purses.

The race lasted twelve minutes. Somehow the sorrel straightened up, surged forward, and proceeded to neatly cross four five-foot fences, an irrigation ditch, a gate, and two hurdles. The British horse never had a chance. The nobles were confounded but paid up with good humor and repaired to a nearby saloon for refreshment. A bit later, the Americans watched the old gentleman and the man with the gold certificates carefully lead the sorrel into a waiting boxcar bound for Chicago.

After two years in the Gallatin Valley, the British colonies began to break apart. Dissension grew, often over financial arrangements within the English-owned companies. The

anticipated fortunes had not been realized, and the long, bitter winter of 1886–1887 dealt a further blow. From Canada to Mexico, along the Rocky Mountain front range, livestock froze to death in great numbers. The blooded pilgrim stock of horses and cattle, brought to Montana at great expense, could not survive the endless days of low temperatures. Dreams of the good life began to pale for the British settlers, and some left their ranches. Surviving stock was shipped by rail to British interests in Canada.

James Randall decided to stay on for a bit but felt his wife, who tired of his long absences from the Culver Place, should return to England. She left in fall 1887. Isabelle Randall very quickly interested British publisher W. H. Allen and Company in her letters, and a compilation of them came out before the end of the year.

At least one copy of the book made it to the Gallatin Valley. Reviews published in the Bozeman *Avant Courier* were not favorable:

The ladies of Gallatin Valley have a right to feel indignant, as the writer’s ridicule and unwarranted statements have no foundation in fact and were intended to cast slurs on the integrity and virtue of a class of ladies far superior in

13. *Bozeman (Mont.) Gallatin County Republican*, January 19, 1904.

14. *Philipsburg (Mont.) Mail*, October 7, 1933.

15. *Bozeman (Mont.) Avant Courier*, June 29, 1889.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, April 25, 1889.

18. Joaquin Miller, *An Illustrated History of the State of Montana* (Chicago, 1894), 184.

intellect, culture and refinement to her English "ladyship."<sup>15</sup>

Isabelle Randall did return to the Gallatin Valley in 1889 for a short period of time, perhaps to sell the ranch. Evidently she was on her way to New Zealand to join her husband. Here and there in the *Avant Courier's* columns appeared uncomplimentary social notes. Some comments about the former resident were downright vicious: "Mrs. James Randall was in the burgh Monday, but for some unknown reason failed to call on her numerous (?) lady friends."<sup>16</sup> Others alleged that Isabelle Randall henpecked her husband, was inattentive in church, and ignored her grooming to the point that she had torn seams and grease spots on her suits.

Eventually, a longish poetic "tribute" appeared, signed by "Rustic

Artiste," otherwise known as Aline Ancency Howard, a descendent of French immigrants to the region and graduate of the Gallatin Valley Female Seminary. Mrs. Howard's verses poked fun at Isabelle Randall's snobbery:

Perhaps, she has matchless beauty  
of face  
Encompassed by tresses of curving  
grace  
But to paragons are given the  
leases  
To pick all the rest of the world to  
pieces.<sup>17</sup>

And so the Gallatin Valley women got their revenge.

Some of the Gallatin Valley's Britishers went back home, reformed or not; some moved on to one of the African colonies or to India. Gradually, evidence of the British settlements disappeared. The Culver Place, scene of many a dinner party and tennis game, eventually fell in ruins, and its stone dairy collapsed. Within a few years, the nearby town of Moreland lost its British name and became Manhattan.

Lord Duncan Hunter seems to be the one Englishman who made money on his ventures; he sold his ranch to Marcus Daly of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company for a reported \$95,000. Hunter later tried to interest Gallatin County officials in purchasing the bridges spanning the

Madison and the Jefferson rivers he had bought with the Paul and Hanley Hotel site years before, but the project met with no success. He finally gave the bridges to the county outright in order to avoid taxes. He then moved to Helena where he entered the insurance business and became an American citizen as well as a member of the Montana Club and a Masonic lodge. He married a Rhode Island girl, the daughter of that state's governor.<sup>18</sup>

Little remains in the Gallatin Valley, either in buildings or institutions, to memorialize this short period of British residence. Will-o'-the-wisp, they came and went, leaving with us, perhaps, a vision of laughing young men and women dressed in crimson, riding in search of jackrabbits. *M*

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After two years, the English ranches in Gallatin Valley began to fail, then were bankrupted by the severe winter of 1886-1887. Lord Duncan Hunter (left, November 13, 1886) seems to be the only Gallatin Valley Britisher who made money on his ventures and one of the few to make a permanent home in Montana. The Randalls left, but Isabelle recorded her stay in letters that were published in 1887, leaving a legacy in written "snapshots" of a unique Montana experience.

F. Jay Haynes, photographer, Haynes Foundation Collection, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

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