Montanans' Tolerance Stops Where Property Line Begins

Freemen, Fast Drivers, Odd Hermits Left Alone Until They Go Too Far

Julie Sullivan

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At our house in Montana, vehicles were often parked where the patio should have been.

My dad, a rancher who moved to town, never gave up on worn-out equipment that might someday be useful again. Our back yard became a boneyard for a Willy's jeep, a station wagon, an old Ford pickup with a push-button start.

I was never as mystified by this impulse as I was by how tolerant our neighbors were of it. Never a suggestion of censure, no hint of disapproval. They never said a word.

I've been reminded of it recently, reading of events in Montana.

"First the unrestricted speed limit, then the freemen and now the Unabomber," recited one resident who received calls from friends nationwide.

"Why Montana?" they asked.

Observers theorize that Unabomber suspect Theodore Kaczynski moved there to live unnoticed.

But I would argue he was noticed. Lincoln residents knew his route to the library, how much he paid for his bicycle, how eccentric he was. They just never said a word.

It is a tolerance peculiar to the region, born not so much of friendliness or open-mindedness, as of self-regulation.

Montanans have historically been self-sufficient. With so few people and such vast distances, law enforcement was often scarce, Washington, D.C., too far away. Besides, you didn't know those guys anyway.

Tolerance was the best defense for the frontier: You stay out of my way, I'll stay out of yours.

"There's a very strong ethic here that says you leave people alone if you can," says Tom Roll, an archaeologist with Montana State University.

That struck Helena research historian Dave Walter almost immediately when he moved to the state in 1965.

"While you might know something about your neighbor, there was a real hands-off way of dealing with them," he remembers. "It was terribly refreshing."

Walter saw it as a function of the geography, sheer space allowing people to be any way they want to be. It seems to stretch beyond the borders, too, into North Idaho and northeast Washington.

It also is a means of survival, in a place where making a living is so hard people must concentrate on their own business.

But the people living there do notice outsiders. In Lincoln, as in Great Falls and Helena and Grass Range, people are observed, often closely.

"We've lived in Colorado, Texas and Montana, and in Montana, people know when you're new in town," says Jeannette Bartel, a church employee in Butte.

"Moving here was an adjustment for me," says Helena's Joan Specking, who used to live in Seattle. "Everybody knows what everybody else is doing. You couldn't keep anything secret if you hid it under your pillow."

One former Montana journalist remembers how everyone seemed to already know the bad news about their neighbors — but didn't seem to care.

To a point.

Once an eccentricity or belief infringes on property rights, diverts an irrigation ditch or breaks the law, the tolerance ends.

"When it swings the other way, Montanans can become terribly intolerant," Walter says.

The freemen in Jordan had been good neighbors. "They didn't bother us, and we didn't bother them," said an adjacent landowner. Right up to the time that spring planting had to be done and the new owners of the freemen's foreclosed ranch needed to move in. Right up until they threatened local lives.

Neighbors were talking of forming a posse when federal officials moved in. Like the Vigilantes who in the 1860s turned swiftly on the bandit Henry Plummer and his gang, there is the impulse to take care of things yourself.

In Montana these few weeks, people have watched events with chagrin and dark humor: "Welcome to Big Scare Country," they joke. "Land of Indictment, The Last Best Place ... to Hide."

But my guess is, they will soon lose patience with the Lincoln investigation and the freemen stand-off; with the media covering the events, with tourism officials worrying over them, and people like me commenting on them.

It is simply too harsh of an economy there, too long a winter, too hard a country to spend much more time and energy on.

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