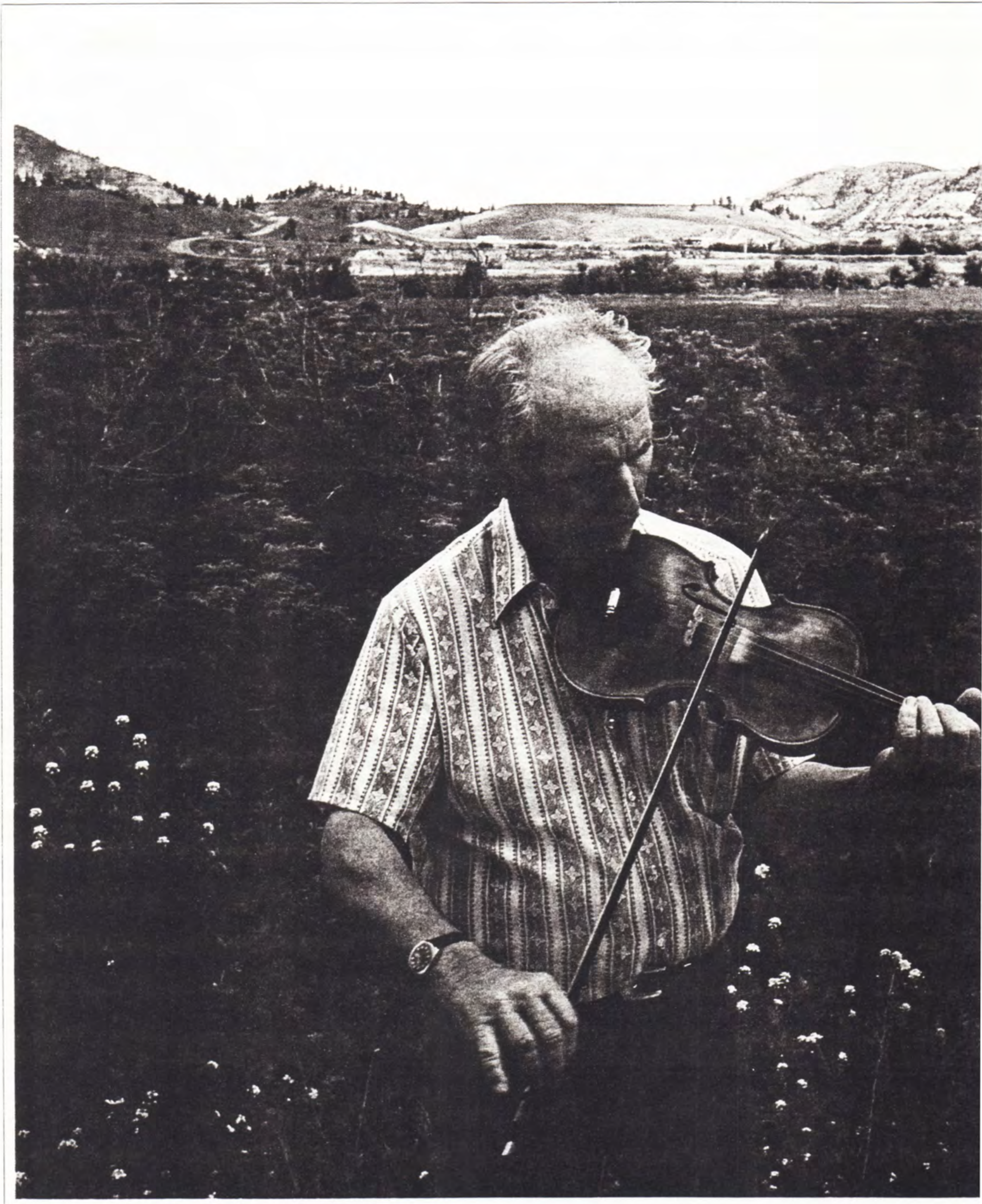

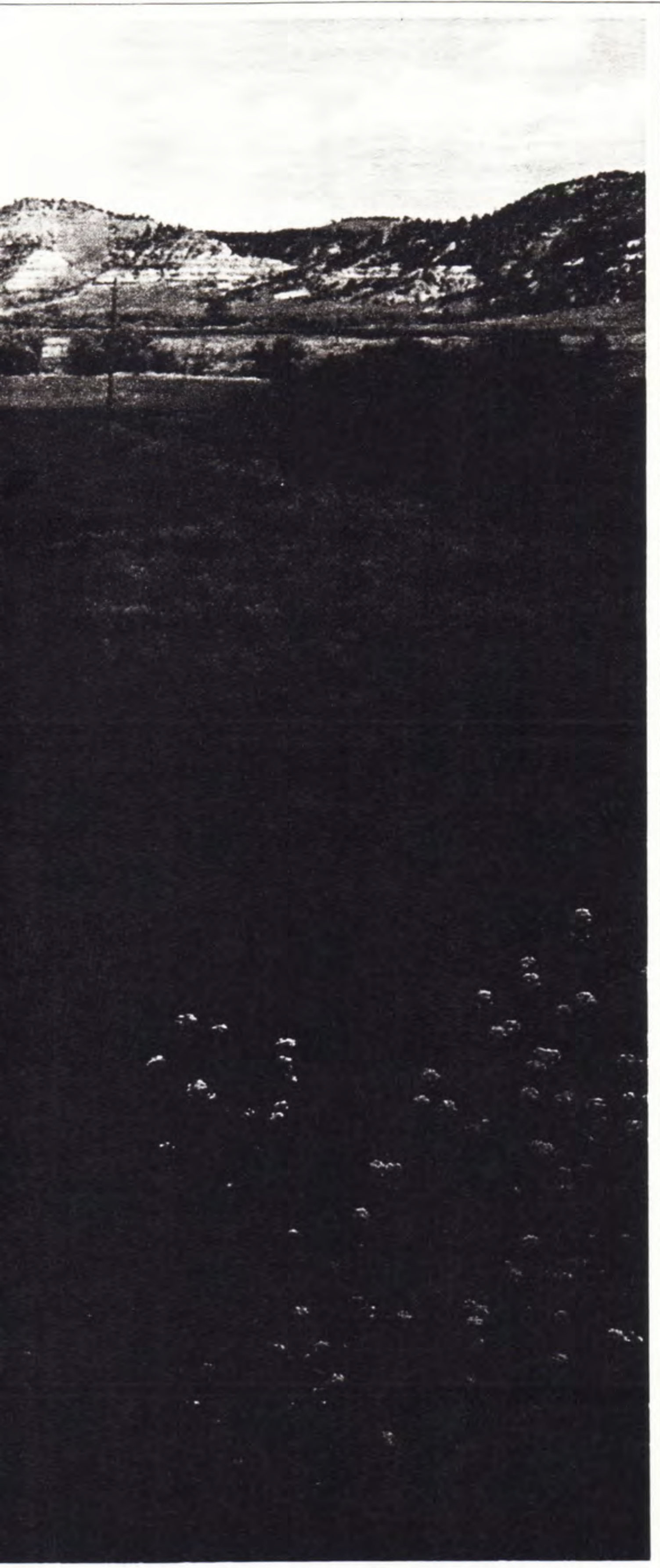

PRESENCE OF THE PAST ON THE MONTANA FRONTIER

THE SONG OF OTTER CREEK

BY DAVID BRESKIN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEOFFREY BIDDLE

THE SONG OF OTTER CREEK, MONTANA, is a song of solitude, a song of open time and open space. It's the refrain of a retirement that begins with birth. It goes something like this: downtown Otter is the Bear Creek Store, featuring two gas pumps, fifty post office boxes, seven shelves of canned goods and sundries, five shelves of books (mostly paperback), one freezer full of cigarettes, and one Alice Fleming, proprietor. No library card is needed to take out books—"just take 'em and replace 'em." The best reading in town is taped to the wall—the forty-two FBI warnings of dangerous criminals.

The population of Otter proper generally fluctuates between one and three, when Alice and her husband are joined by a sturdy adolescent imported for summer help. "This is the American West," sighs Alice, "or what's left of it I 'spose."

Though downtown Otter is a good-natured joke of a town, it quickly gives way to greater Otter extending due north down the creek. The creek squiggles through a stiletto-thin peninsula of private land, only a few hundred yards wide in places, that slices through Custer National Forest. It is seventy-five (mostly unpaved) miles to the nearest town of any size—Sheridan, Wyoming.

Electricity did not come to Otter until 1952, the party-line telephone not until a dozen years later. Direct dial—a rude insult to traditional rural curiosity—push buttoned its way up the creek only recently. There were many more folk on the creek sixty years ago—after the giddy rush of homesteading, before the Depression and its locusts, grasshoppers, Mormon crickets, and drought. Horses outnumber people, cows are the main constituents. "Your biggest obstacle here," says a lifetime resident, "is being so far from no place."

Standing amid the spring's lush growth of wild mustard, Clifford Thex concentrates on making his fiddle sing. His brand of music? Thex, winner of a 1981 state fiddling championship, calls it "old Western hoedown." The fiddle he plays was made for him by a friend in Billings.

In the branding scene (above), *a calf lies pinned to the dirt by the full weight of an experienced hand. The wide eye of the captured calf and the muddied shirt of the cowboy speak plainly of ranch-life realities in Otter. Rancher Lee Dunning* (opposite) *rests for a moment on his horse during a strenuous day that began before dawn. Behind him, acres upon acres of range stretch toward the horizon, land which the Dunnings have worked for generations.*

At 3:30 in the morning, dreams give way to bacon and pancakes hissing on the griddle. Outside, the air smells of soaked sagebrush, and the moon slides behind wandering clouds over Otter Creek valley. Lee Dunning, a third-generation rancher on this land, and his wife, Doris Lee, scout the sky for clues. Members of generations four and five are still asleep, as is old Sid Dunning (generation two) at his place a mile and a half down the creek. Lee makes a rare phone call (two or three a month, usually) to the Stevens ranch to see whether they have decided to brand. Mark Stevens, great grandson of Captain Calvin Clark Howes who settled on the creek in 1883, will risk the weather; he will brand.

Horses are persuaded into trailers, slickers and hats donned, cigarettes lipped, chaws implanted, and pickups driven up Taylor Creek to the grazing highlands and draws of Custer, where the ranchers run their head by government permit. Lee says it was not too long ago that everyone rode horseback from home to "Up Top," and he drives as though he misses those days—slowly, at a trot, spotting a pheasant on the cattle guard here and an antelope there.

"Mark's one of the local land barons," another rancher clucks later on. Despite smoldering resentment on the part of some toward Mark's position and his desire to brand a record 350 calves in a single day (forcing a rather un-Otterly pace onto the affair), everyone needed for both roundup and branding has shown up. That is the tradition; you help out, and you are helped.

Tradition: calves are still roped and rassled here, not locked in a squeeze. Castration and dehorning is by blade, not elastic band and chemical. The blood is still red, smoke still green gray with flesh, cries of calves still human, government still to blame for all problems not blamed on weather or commodities double-talk, teenage boys still show-offs in the pen, manure still the common denominator for all bad luck, calf balls still oysters on the dinner table. A single ritual conjures up and confirms an entire way of life, a history. It is as much re-creation as recreation, shadow as much as fact.

For many city folk, the branding pen is merely one station on the invisible assembly line that makes food. But here, the

branding is a time for inventory, celebration, town meeting, mythmaking, work, spirit, story, and a kind of rich regenerative violence. When you burn your initials on a beast, is he not *yours*? When you cut off his testicles and eat them, does he not become part of *you*?

In 1884, nine-year-old Levi Howes kept a diary:

Thursday, 6° below, Stormey: Turned Charley out commenced lessons. Friday, 18° below, Stormey: I went down to talor creek to see the horses, no coyotes. Saturday, 4° above, Fine: shut Topsy up in the henhouse to night. Sunday, 2° above, Variable: Stewart went hunting killed two deer. Tuesday, 6° Fine: I found Ton ded in the stable this morn his head and shoulders were under the poles on the side of the stall. Thursday, 34° above, Stormey though warm: Plucked chickens and had chicken pie for supper. Friday, 31° above, Fine: Two calves were born in the coral last night. David got loose in the stable and was cicking Mr. Mikes horse.

Today in Otter, people and their animals still live intimately side by side. Socializing is one thing, but real com-

Cows are the main constituents. On Otter Creek, the biggest obstacle is being so far from no place.

munion lies with critters, not with neighbors, on this creek. Grown suspicious of people through a life of self-reliance, many folk clearly prefer the company of horse or dog or cow to that of human compatriot. And who can blame them? It has not been a very good century for human nature.

"Horses are smarter than cows. Horses are smarter than people," says Hardtime Rogers, an old hand of Mark Stevens. "People don't understand my horses, helping me the way they do. A lot more people than horses have let me down—why, I've had horses that would run till they fell over dead for me. It's hard to get qualified hands now. We had two boys, one of 'em was twenty-two and one twenty-five, and they wasn't worth the salt that would blow 'em to hell. They thought they was cowboys, but they didn't know the first thing about cowboyin'. Hell, I can move more cattle with one horse and two dogs than with five or six of these young cowboys."

HIGH SCHOOL CHEERLEADER CINDY LEE STEVENS tries to fill the space between country and town. She has spent nine months in each of the past few years attending school in Dayton, Wyoming, eighty-five miles away. The lack of schooling on Otter Creek is nothing new; her family has kept a home-away-from-home in the Sheridan area since 1918. "It's hard to know whether to leave your husband here or your children there," reflects Cindy Lee's mother, Nan, "but I decided to stay in town with the kids." One of them, Mary Susan, was graduated from high school last spring. Tired of the rhythms and routines of her home, she wants to leave Otter Creek and steadies her summer with dreams of living in Paris. Her journey toward independence begins this year at Stevens College in Missouri.

But for every Mary Susan of this New-Old West and every Midnight Cowboy, there is a Cindy Lee. At home on the range and in the rodeo, she decided to move back to the Stevens's ranch in Otter and commute to the high school in Broadus, the seat of Powder River County. Her mother drives her the twenty miles or so down the creek to the main road, where she waits for the bus to school. Total distance, round trip—130 miles.

All those miles covered with daily nonchalance illustrate the distance between Cindy Lee's generation and generations past on Otter Creek, but they also suggest the subtle continuity of life here—a continuity that closes the space between generations, suturing them almost seamlessly. Cindy Lee's cheering so far from home on a Friday or Saturday night is not so different from her grandparents' dancing at distant Sayle Hall when they were young, when the music did not stop till dawn and either horse or Model T

Cindy Lee Stevens (above) *practices high-school cheers near the old family homestead in Otter. Her school in Broadus, Montana, is more than sixty miles away, a commute she makes willingly every day. Earlier generations on the creek also had to surmount the problems of isolation; Cindy's grandparents traveled miles in a Model T to attend dances at Sayle Hall. Family portraits* (opposite) *are displayed by Lee and Sid Dunning, left to right. The aura of the past is strong in Otter. Proud of those who came before them, creek residents relish telling stories of earlier days. Four generations of Dunnings live in Otter.*

—no matter which—was ornery all the way home in the frosty morning.

In 1897 three Cheyennes killed a sheepherder who caught them butchering cattle. Old White Bull was hungry for "a piece of a white man's heart." Otter's women and children were sent to Miles City and Sheridan. Men constructed and manned a fort atop a hill next to Levi Howes's ranch house. As Howes's journal tells the story: "The Indians held a dance and decided we were too strong for them, so they gave up the murderers, who were soon turned loose by the authorities and allowed to go back to the reservation."

There is a subtle continuity of life here—a continuity closing the space between one generation and the next.

Today, descendents fight the ancient war between Indians and whites in the bars of Ashland, just outside the Northern Cheyenne reservation. Fort Howes still stands, now above the Stevens's ranch house and a mobile home. The ranger station is called Fort Howes, too. Custer's name belongs to the national forest that borders the reservation.

The topic of Indians brings a strong response from the people of Otter. "The Indian thought this was his land, but what did he do to develop it? He didn't take care of the land. He was just one of these kinda guys that wants to live off the land and hopes it takes care of *him*" (an Otter Creek rancher). "Great Spirit / Grant that I / may not criticize my / neighbor until I have / walked a mile in his / moccasins" (Indian Prayer hung on a ranch hand's wall). "How do I feel about the Indians? 'Bout the same way I do about the niggers" (that same ranch hand). "Now they're being educated, and they've had it driven into them so much that they should have more privileges than the white. They're, how would you say, a little obnoxious about it. Through all these programs they've had everything given to them. They haven't had to work for it like us whites have" (Otter Creek ranchwoman). "Each Crow Indian is worth six million dollars with all their coal. But these ladies from a church in East Saint Louis—the worst ghetto in the country—send them out food and clothes. Hell, they own motor scooters, nice houses, ponies, Mustang automobiles. The church people think they live in tipis" (another rancher). "I think the Indians are destroying the place. They're sneaking off the reservation and killing the elks. They get drunk down in Ashland and stir things up and have shotguns and pistols too" (ten-year-old Otter boy).

As J. Fred Toman suggests in his introduction to *Echoing Footsteps*, a history of Powder River County, the attitude toward the Indian has historically been much like the attitude toward "the gray wolves that used to kill our livestock years ago, the rattlesnakes with their deadly bite, or the prairie dogs which ate our grass."

Time passes slowly in Otter. As each day shrugs by, the present eases into the past, the object of fierce devotion among creek residents. The aura of the past is strong, perhaps because there are so many reminders of it in daily life. Worn-out shotguns and old maps hang on walls, buggies and sleighs stand by horses in stalls, scrapbooks hold hand-tinted portraits and crinkly receipts of nineteenth-century railroad men. Recipes and temperaments are handed down from one generation to the next, and stories become tall tales—taller and taller with each telling till they cannot be stopped, with even the slightest alcoholic lubrication, from sliding out

again. And when they are told, it is without the traditional flourishes of storytelling, but rather in a kind of code made up of nickname, nuance, accent, laughter, long pause, gesture, and secret geography.

Yet some stories seem virtually untellable. Having grown almost mythic in scope, they cast shadows over the whole history of the creek as well as the room in which they are told. One such story describes "The Quiet Slaughter of 1900." The Slaughter casts such an ominous shadow that the teller may fear he will not find his way out of it once he has ridden, whole-hog, in. It is safer to refer to the fiction of "official" written accounts. The Quiet Slaughter? Simple enough: in the dark of night, eleven masked cattlemen clubbed 3,000 sheep to death while their neighbors were attending a public dance. Seems like close kin of those men still breathe on the creek; better stick to the tale of Fearless Earless Harold Sprague and how he lost his . . . .

If stories are not forgotten, neither are grudges. There are inter- and intra-family squabbles that go so far back, most folk do not know (or care to remember) how they got started. Past *as* present: brothers and sisters, fathers and sons who do not speak for years and an ingrained system of familial cliques are the unspoken order of the day. If the men say anything, they say that the women always start the disputes, and the women say "hogwash."

PUT YOUR EAR TO THE GROUND near Otter Creek and you will hear the rumbling of approaching draglines ripping up the coal-rich Powder River Basin. To the west, Decker sports the largest strip mine in the country; to the south, the formerly sleepy cow town of Gillette stirs with the lusty rapaciousness euphemized by its motto, "Energy Capital of the Nation"; to the east, Belle Creek pumps away for oil; and to the north, the indelicately named company town of Colstrip, Montana, builds power plants three and four, a subdivision called Bachelor Village, and new piles of overburden. Indeed, as American civilization marches into and exploits the wilderness with renewed vigor (after a few years off for R & R—guilt, stewardship), a place such as Otter Creek becomes a reservation in its own right.

Energy companies become the new cowboys—dominating the landscape, smiled on by Washington—and cowboys become the new Indians—fighting to save their way of life or acquiescing for a pretty price. Rarely have current events been illuminated by such a blaze of historical irony. The Creek ranchers, being good Republicans and Sagebrush Rebels, do not oppose "development" per se. (One cannot defend 1880s homesteading and at the same time disparage 1980s strip mining and reclamation; they are both born of the same mind.) Ranchers simply do not want to see a Fort Howes Holiday Inn in their lifetime.

Otter's future is uncertain. Mining concerns covet the land as an energy and transportation corridor.

Yet some Otter Creek ranchers have already leased their mineral or surface rights, and others would do so in a minute if the corporations put the decimal point in the right place, though they would never let on as much to their fellow ranchers. Some find themselves organizing in the odd company of "radical" environmentalists (there are no other sort to Otter folk), while others use a mode of discouragement more in keeping with Western history.

"Sure I've threatened with my shotgun," spits Sarah Thex Gaskill, a sixty-eight-year-old rancher who lives alone. "I might even be dead by the time they put a railroad through here, 'cause it'll be over my dead body. They can't get any coal without a rail, and they ain't gonna get it. I've been fighting them for twenty-five years, and I'll fight 'em to the finish. I threatened them with their very life once, when they overstayed their drilling or surveying or whatever contract. They were supposed to stay three weeks, and they were here over two months, and when they drove out they made hash of that section of land."

"We already begun to get outsiders comin' through the country stealin' things," gripes Lee Dunning. "People from Gillette, Colstrip—they take saddles and stuff layin' around." Gertrude Storm, another branch of the Howes's tree, says, "Used to be everybody waved at you when they went down the road, now we get strangers passin' through." Outsiders, strangers, disconcerting though they may be, are only puppets of federal policy. James Watt, hardly the sort to steal a saddle, poses the greater threat: the ban on mining national forest land is reversible, and mining concerns covet Otter Creek as an "energy and transportation corridor."

About such matters, Winston Watt is ambivalent. He has been a Creek rancher for many a year and James Watt's uncle for many a year. "When I watch the news," Winston wryly cracks, "I wish we could secede from Massachusetts. Those eastern folk want their gas and oil and coal, but no mines or refineries." Winston pauses to remind us of another James in the Watt family—James Watt of Scotland who invented the modern steam engine, key to the industrial revolution.

In Otter the midsummer sun can crisp faces as surely as any Arizona assault, and the scowling winter whiteness can blue ears and fingers with the audacity of the Yukon or the rugged Scandinavian countryside from which so many Montana families spring. A twenty-minute hail storm (like the rainless one of May 22, 1932) can leave houses buried up to their roofs in pellets. Out one window, the sky promises heaven; out the other, your sins become apparent. "If you moved here," says Hardtime Rogers with a certain scientific tone, "it would take you three or four years to fade in with

The blue ribbon of Otter Creek (left) *squiggles through private ranch land, bordered on both sides by Custer National Forest. The nearest town of any size is Sheridan, Wyoming–seventy-five, mostly unpaved, miles away. Content with the wide open spaces, Frank Hagen, the youngest rancher on the creek, claims, "Ten more inches of rainfall a year, and it would be paradise." Ranchwoman Sarah Thex Gaskill* (opposite) *holds photographs of herself and her husband. A widow, she is fighting attempts to put a railroad through her land.* (Below) *Creek resident Winston Watt speaks his mind. Uncle of Secretary of the Interior James Watt, he is critical of Easterners who want gas, oil, and coal, but no mines or refineries. Some ranchers on the creek have already leased their mineral or surface rights. Otter is near the largest strip mine in the United States at Decker, Montana.*

the people and get your body communicated with the weather."

To fade in with the people is no mean feat. Few have tried. Frank Hagen, the youngest rancher on the creek, is one who has. He left Berkeley's Ph.D. program in biochemistry in favor of Otter. But he already had ties to the creek: his granddad had a ranch that Hagen often visited as a child, coming out from his native Sheridan. Still, Frank says, "I was frightened the first years I was here, 'cause everybody knew my name, and I didn't know who they were. I kinda get along with everybody, though I'm not close to anyone either. That's alright. I've got freedom here. Good animals, peace. I figure this is as far west as you can go; you go west of Montana and Wyoming, and you're going east again. Ten more inches of rainfall a year, and it would be paradise."

But young men and women of the West are headed for boomtowns, for bars and bucks, not ranch work. And though other ranchers may want to come in, land remains a member of the family in Otter—you do not put it up for adoption if there is kin who will care for it. So, the future of the creek lies in its children. Will they leave, or will they stay, patient with the distance that is both the greatest obstacle and purest blessing, that both unifies and separates community and individual.

The barefoot children run wild through the meadow. They race to the fence and back, first imitating a horse's gait and then patting a horse in the stable. Scott stops to recite a dream he had last night: "The flying coyote came and ate up all the baby kitties. It happened right here in the yard, and it was scary. Then my father came out and shot him in the back. The mother of the kitties ran up a tree before they got ate up."

The children resume their attack on the quiet afternoon: screaming, leaping puddles, kicking a calf or two in the pen in a friendly fashion, singing, stretching the wings of a dead bird, playing with the baby kittens still very much alive. ✡

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