

Life without fanciness

Getting by on the Plains

Is the depopulation of the Plains inevitable? Not according to this article. Life in the region is possible if lived within the limits set by the region, rather than by standards set by the humid parts of the nation.

by Bert Lindler

It's never been as easy to find a comfortable job in the Rocky Mountain West as in the more settled regions of the country. But there's always been a stream of migrants leaving the coasts and agricultural heartlands of America for the rugged beauty of the West. And despite the return stream of Westerners seeking the high-brow culture, education or high salaries of the more settled regions, there have always been Westerners that hardship could not displace.

For these individuals, it was better to get by in the West than to get ahead somewhere else. Henry David Thoreau expressed the idea in *Walden*, a book written during a two-year retreat from the commerce of the city. He compared the jobs of those living "lives of quiet desperation" to making and selling baskets.

"...instead of studying how to make it worth men's while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them," he wrote. Lloyd Oswood has taken his advice.

When the thermometer drops to 35 degrees below zero and winds whip off the Sweetgrass Hills to sift snow through the cracks of his homestead shack near the Canadian border, Lloyd Oswood turns up the fuel oil burner in his converted wood stove.

"It's not the best goddamn thing," he said as he took another sip of Milwaukee's Best. "It's the same as the Pilgrims had."

But when the electricity was out

during one winter storm, Oswood's shack filled with neighbors cooking steaks on the old stove, which also has propane burners for cooking.

"Ain't got no fanciness," Oswood said. "People don't need that fanciness."

Oswood's jeans were shiny black above the knees, where he wiped his hands on them. He had a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, though he insists he never inhales.

A Zane Grey paperback, *Wanderer of the Wasteland*, was lying open, face down, on the wooden kitchen table. The mattress on the bed alongside the wall was water-stained, topped with faded covers.

"This is my mother's homestead shack," Oswood said. "I haven't gone up to the split-level stuff, have I? No, I haven't. No, I haven't."

With the exception of a five-year hitch in the Army during World War II, Oswood has spent 72 years in the foothills of the Sweetgrass Hills 20 miles from the paved road near Chester, Mont.

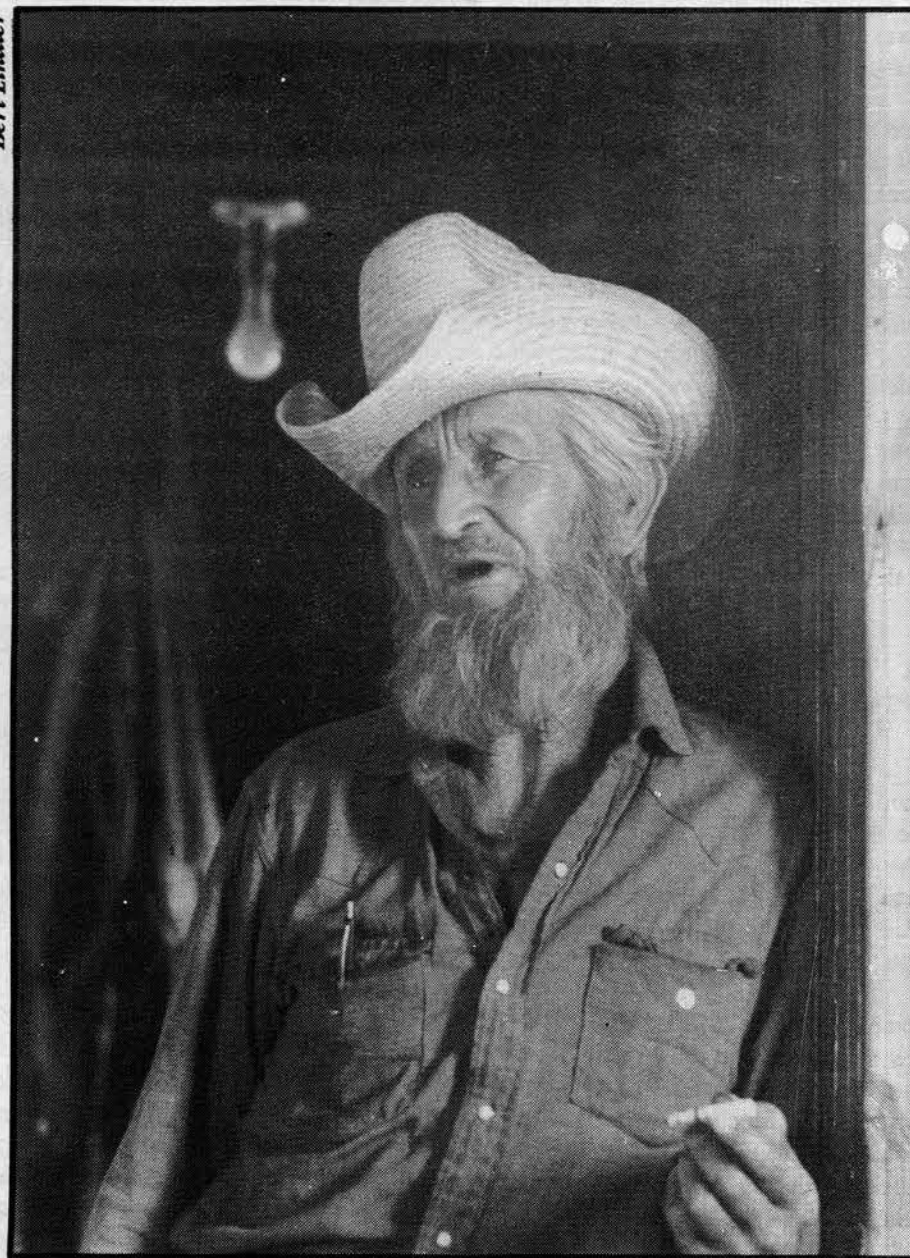
His father came to the United States from Bergen, Norway, homesteading the small ranch along Corral Creek in 1912, when promises of easy living on the prairie drew many settlers to Montana.

The promises held out as long as the rains. But since the 1920s, it has taken more than a few hundred acres of grassland to make it in Montana. Still, Oswood has held on.

He worked odd jobs until his father died. Then he ran a few cattle to support his needs. Now he leases his land.

"A little place like that you can't run over 50 or 60 cattle," Oswood said. "You

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Lloyd Oswood

can't make any money and you sure as hell can lose."

His entire herd died during one winter storm. "I just hauled 'em into the nonprofit pile," he said. "There's no use crying about the damn things. You can't bring 'em back to life."

There's no power on the place other than the generator Oswood bought a year ago to run a few electric lights. "Expensive son-of-a-gun," he said. "And a lot of work. You've got to pack gasoline to it."

Food and beer are stored in the dirt cellar beneath the house. The food's in cans, or "airtight."

"Well, if they aren't airtight, you got damn trouble," he explained.

Along one wall of the entryway to the house are a washpail and a "stomper," an upside-down metal funnel on a wooden handle.

On infrequent washdays, Oswood fills the pail with water and a little cold-water soap and agitates his snap-button cowboy shirts and jeans with the stomper. He's taken his clothes to the laundromat a few times. "But, I tell you what," he said. "A laundromat is damn tough on clothes."

In the rocks above the house are three rattlesnake dens. When the snakes need thinning in the fall, Oswood heads to the dens with a stick. He flips a few out, hits them with the stick to injure their feelings, and then steps on their heads with his boot heel.

"You got to be kind of damn fast on your feet," he said. "I don't do it by myself now."

He skinned one snake right after he killed it and stretched its skin over the cantle of his saddle, where it remains today. Rattlesnakes have got natural glue if you skin them right away, he said.

Oswood has never been bit. "A rattlesnake isn't so bad," he said. "They don't go for you. They go away from you, don't they?"

Someone once suggested he dynamite the dens. "They stay up on the hill," he protested. "They don't bother any-

body. Why eliminate everything?"

Oswood used to spend a lot of time in the saddle. "I've been stacked up, walked on and kicked on," he said.

But no matter what the circumstance, he wanted his horses to stay with him. When a horse would run off, he would catch it, wrap a rope around its front foot and tie the rope to the saddlehorn, flipping the horse on its side. After the horse had a chance to learn its lesson, Oswood would let it get up.

In recent years, Oswood has spent more time in the hospital than in the saddle. Last winter, he was treated for a bad case of the water belly. That, he explained, is cow country talk for a prostate operation.

The nurses could make his hospital bed bend up and down like a bucking bronc. But still he couldn't wait to get back to the faded covers of his bed in the Sweetgrass Hills. "I think if you're not sick, you've got everything," he said.

"I don't see why people weep and wail and cry the blues, because they got everything," Oswood said. "People ain't got it too bad. They're eating three squares and buying drinks."

"I think people is just too damn fancy. I can't see all this stuff. Air conditioning. If it's too hot, roll the window down. If it's too cold, roll the window up."

In the evenings, Oswood enjoys going to the Lamplighter Bar, where he dances with the ladies and whistles with the band. When he accompanied me to my car as I was leaving, Oswood opened the door of his pickup and turned on the radio. Soon he was accompanying the band, his whistling as pure and sweet as the chirping of a bird.

"Some days you're up," he had told me. "Some days you're down. Some day you're going to be deep in the ground. No use crying."