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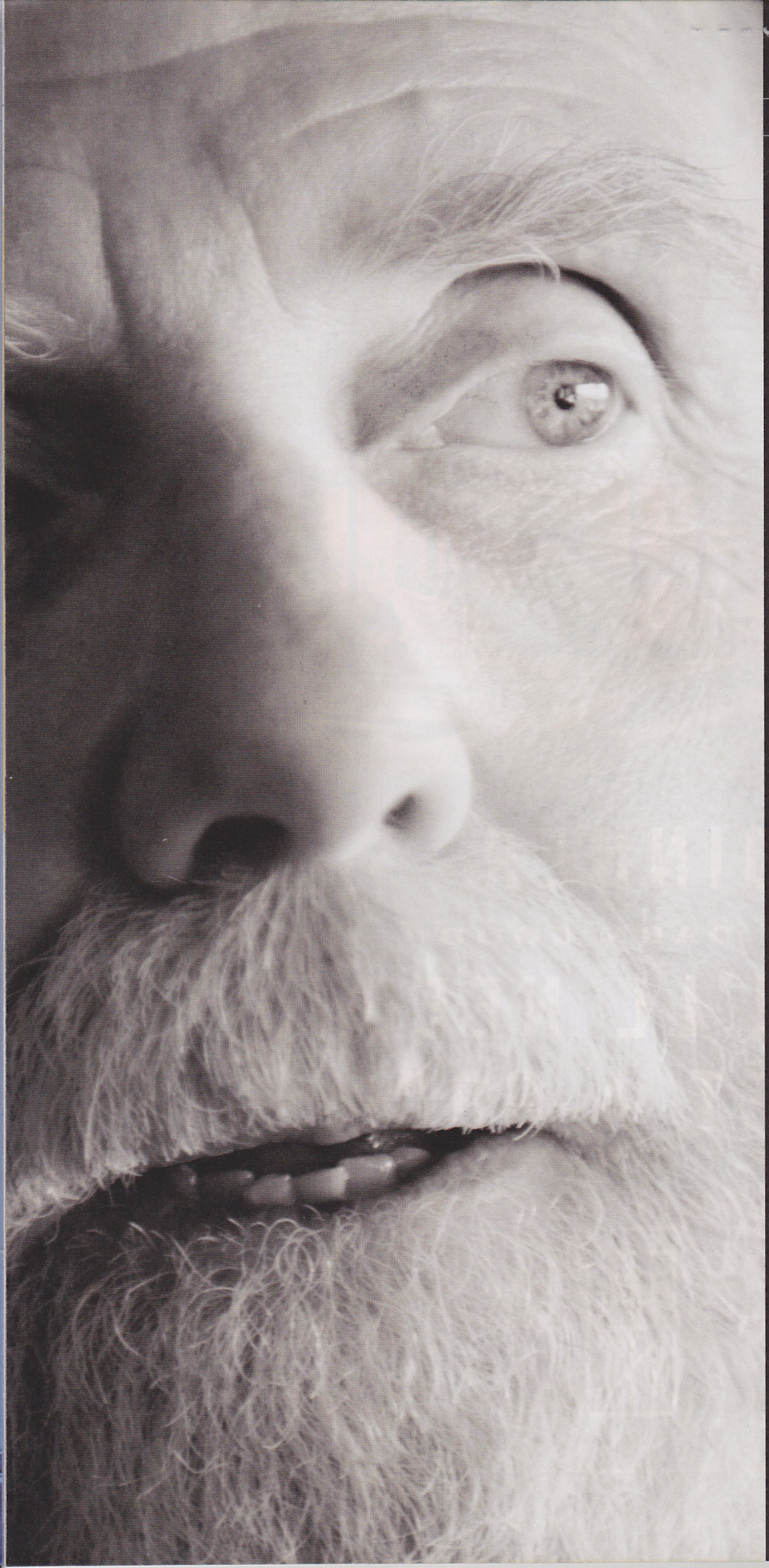


HISTORY

After Ivan

A visit to Meagher County now that a famous son is gone

BY BEN NICKOL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE

"Whenever I got sleepy in one of the other saloons, I would go out to our pickup, clutch the gearshift up away from the edge of the seat, and curl myself down, the steering wheel over me like a hollowed moon …"

Of course, there are important differences between the White Sulphur Springs of the 1940s and the White Sulphur of now. For one thing, the town described in *This House of Sky* existed in part to support a robust sheep industry. For much of his life, Charlie Doig worked on those wool operations, whether as a camp tender or foreman. One of the ranches, known as the Camas Ranch, ran as many as 6,000 ewes when Charlie Doig worked there.

"Lambing at the Camas stretched as one long steady emergency, like a war alert which never quite ignites into battle but keeps on demanding scurry and more scurry."

As of 2010, the U.S. Department of Agriculture inventoried no more than 4,900 head of sheep in all of Meagher County. Over the course of my time in and around White Sulphur Springs, I see not one fleecy beast. There are plenty of black cattle freckled across the snowy benchlands, and plenty of lean antelope fleeing through the fields. But no sheep.

Also, sadly, there's no longer any Ivan. On April 9, 2015, after 16 volumes of fiction and nonfiction, and after 75 years of life, Doig passed away in Seattle from complications of multiple myeloma. But even before his death, Doig was never really a fixture in the town where he had spent his formative years. According to his widow, Carol Doig, after the passing of his father and grandmother in White Sulphur in the 1970s, Ivan simply felt that there had been "too much family death" in the Smith River Valley for him to go back there. Instead he was drawn to the Rocky Mountain Front, in and around Dupuyer, where he spent his later childhood, enjoyed some comparatively stable and happy years and set several of his later novels.

Yet even before Doig distanced himself from White Sulphur Springs, the town and Meagher County were in flux. Towards the end of *This House of Sky*, Doig describes his surprise at returning to his hometown in the early 1960s and encountering "the blue plume of smoke from the sawmill's scrap burners." In just the few years since he'd moved away, the town had "swapped itself from being a livestock town to a logging town." This itself was a short-lived transformation. In the 1980s, the mill was shuttered, and the town once more swapped itself, this time from a logging town into … well, the residents weren't sure what.

Timber, for a short while, was big business in White Sulphur Springs. Today, it takes a good deal of looking to come across the pile of logs outside Quita Myrstol's home on the eastern edge of White Sulphur Springs. Myrstol says she and her husband, Tyler, took over the family timber business in 2001, and employ up to a dozen people.

Sarah Calhoun and her 10-year-old border collie, Nellie, relax on the couch in the small apartment at the back of the Red Ants Pants headquarters in White Sulphur Springs.

In fact, even today, White Sulphur Springs isn't certain what will replace the lumber economy that half a century ago replaced their wool economy. As happened so many times to the Doigs when Ivan was young, the town itself has been thrust into improvising, by one means or another, some kind of livelihood. For Charlie Doig, this meant hopping from one ranch to another, combing up and down the Smith River Valley. It meant, one year, acquiring the lease on a café and launching himself, with no prior experience, into the restaurant business, only to abandon that endeavor a few seasons later and rededicate himself to ranching.

For today's residents of White Sulphur Springs, the quest for stability and solvency has inspired a similarly diverse range of enterprises. The best known of them, perhaps, is Sarah Calhoun's Red Ants Pants, a company that designs and manufactures sturdy apparel for women working hard in the outdoors. Red Ants Pants also sponsors an annual music festival in White Sulphur Springs, which in recent years has drawn acts such as Merle Haggard, Emmylou Harris and Charley Pride. The town has also produced musical talent of its own, most notably Taylor Gordon, the son of a slave who went on to international fame as a singer of spirituals. On occasion, he'd perform in his home town.

"Every so often he would perform at the high school auditorium, singing the spirituals he had heard from his mother as she worked at her wash tubs. His tenor voice could ripple like muscle, hold like a hawser across the notes: Swiiing *low, sweet* chaaaariot *..."*

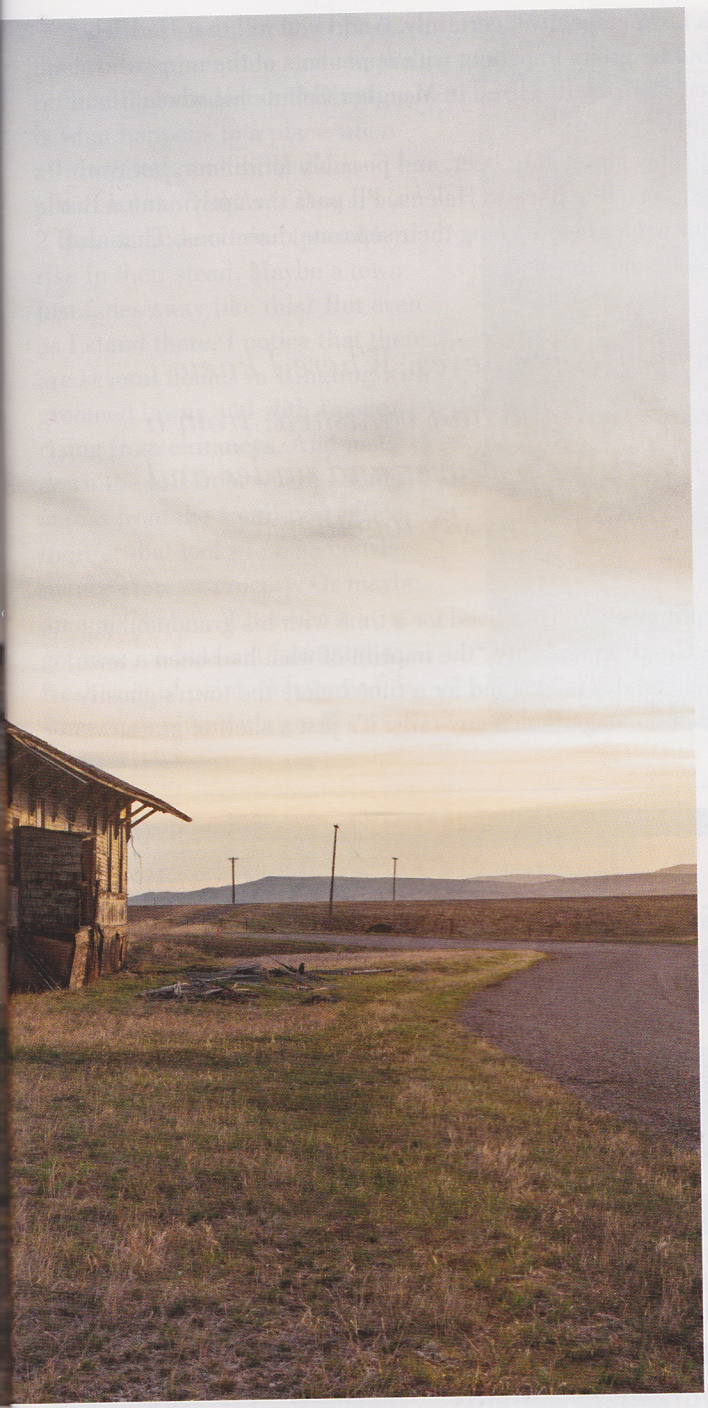
It's a Saturday, but Calhoun and several employees are hard at work. They're gearing up for the announcement of the music festival's 2016 lineup, and also for a community Easter event that they're hosting the next morning. Calhoun leads me into the building's rear office, where every horizontal surface has been given over to overflowing bowls of Easter candy. The office has a decidedly domestic character, with sofas, a kitchen, a sleeping loft. While trying to get Red Ants Pants off the ground a decade ago, Calhoun lived in the back of the building while working in the front and seeing to whatever repairs the building required. Her company very much evokes the resourcefulness so ubiquitous in *This House of Sky*: cobble together what assets are available, and make as good a go of it as you can, for as long as you can.

"... if the summer could be passed without catastrophe roaring in from the mountains or grabbing up out of the earth, this would at last be a year when we had made good money from the sheep and could afford some new start."

Perhaps it's no accident that the industrious spirit of Ivan's father and grandmother is evident in Calhoun's work. Indeed, as she explains to me, it was after reading *This House of Sky* that she decided to begin a life and a business in Meagher County. With no small amount of pride, she recounts for me a letter that Mr. Doig wrote her in which he commends her for "helping to make his hometown perk."

In White Sulphur Springs, Calhoun isn't alone in her affection for Doig. I meet several individuals who, when I tell them about this article, nod solemnly and respond with some version of: "That's one hell of a book." Calhoun says the book has resonance here because of its refusal to romanticize Montana life. The Big Sky Country experience, after all—and particularly the Meagher County experience—is not all fly fishing and skiing and trophy hunting. As Sarah puts it: "Look, this is a hard place to live." And she believes that the book's acknowledgment of that arduousness—and its respect for it—has in turn earned Doig the respect of the town.

"... the settlers were trying a slab of lofty country which often would be too cold and dry for their crops, too open to a killing winter for their cattle and sheep."



Old and new blend at the 2 Basset Brewery in downtown White Sulphur Springs, where Chris and Barry Hedrich are making a go of things. The Hedrichs say they did much of the remodeling necessary for their new brewery themselves, including the installation of the old-looking tin ceiling.

At left: The train depot in Ringling, a few miles south of White Sulphur Springs, is a relic from the past. Ivan Doig lived in Ringling with his grandmother during the 1940s, when train tracks and trains actually ran through the town.

As I've strolled back and forth down White Sulphur's main drag, I've kept my eye on the 2 Basset Brewery, partly because I'm growing thirsty, but also because the appearance of a new brewery here is an expression of so much of what I find interesting about the town. Like Red Ants Pants and Charlie Doig's café before it, it represents a striking out, an economic rolling of the dice—someone's giving it a go.

Soon, I'm sipping an IPA and visiting with Barry Hedrich, who founded the 2 Basset along with his wife, Chris. Two long dogs commence to sniffing my shoes, and I must be something of a fool because the first question I pose to Barry is: "So what inspired the name 2 Basset?"

Walking around town that morning, I've noticed in several windows the signs offering support for the Black Butte Copper Project, a new mine that could begin operations north of town in the next few years. In Helena, where I live, common bumper stickers read: NO SMITH RIVER MINE! and SAVE OUR SMITH. Is this mine, in Barry's opinion, a good thing?

Hedrich seems concerned with what consequences the mine might have, both good and bad. And while he certainly doesn't deny the risk of the project, he says it's an opportunity to harvest metals that we need in a monitored and regulated environment, as opposed to importing those metals from foreign mines where operations are less controlled. If the mine and its jobs can provide an

economic boost to White Sulphur Springs, all the better. It's a fair perspective, certainly. And I can tell that Hedrich would be open to other perspectives, should they be offered, but he grows impatient with opponents of the mine who come from out of town and talk about preserving "their" Smith River. Hedrich has lived in Meagher County his whole life; if the Smith River belongs to these strangers, then it's certainly news to him.

They're hospitable people at the 2 Basset. They'd like me to stay for another beer, and possibly for dinner, but two drinks is plenty when you're driving remote Montana highways. Traveling back to Helena, I'll pass the aptly named Battle Creek, where Charlie Doig and his second wife endured a bitter winter before going their separate directions. That also was the winter that Ivan's dog fell through the ice of Battle Creek, and drowned.

> *"The grayness stretching all around us baffled my eyes. Where I knew hills had to be no hills showed. The sagebrush too had vanished, from a countryside forested with its clumps. One gray sheet over and under and around, the snow and overcast had fused land and sky together."*

BEFORE LEAVING THE VALLEY, though, I swing through Ringling, where Ivan lived for a time with his grandmother, Bessie Ringer. As Doig describes it, even in the 1940s Ringling was only "the imprint of what had been a town, like the yellowed outline on grass after a tent has been taken down." I stand for a time before the town's ghostly train depot, to the east and west of which runs a right-of-way that no longer holds any rails: it's just a shelf of grass.

Swallows swoop in and out of the structure, tending nests in the rafters. I'm wondering if Ringling is what happens to a place when all the sheep and mills disappear, and no Red Ants Pants, no 2 Basset, and no mine (possibly) rise in their stead. Maybe a town just fades away like this? But even as I stand there, I notice that there are several homes in Ringling with groomed lawns and with smoke rising from chimneys. And just down the hill from where I stand, across from the small post office, there's what looks to be a convenience store or grocery. Or maybe an auto garage. Whatever it is, it's got new ice bins out front and a fresh coat of paint. Whatever it is, someone's giving it a go.

Battle Creek flows through pasture land southwest of White Sulphur Springs. Ivan Doig spent a difficult winter as a child living near the creek.