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The Best Place for Tough Times

*Located on the confluence of ranchland, recreation
and history, White Sulphur Springs offers a curious step back in time*

BY JEFF HULL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE



Main Street, White Sulphur Springs,
wakes up on a recent morning.

THE PAST LIES STREWN ABOUT WHITE SULPHUR Springs like morning-after party favors: mining camps and mansion remnants — the spoor of millionaires from the days when being a millionaire meant something — castles and cowboys, literary legacies and lasting imagery. F. Scott Fitzgerald spent one of his Princeton summers on a nearby ranch and modeled a family in his famous short story, “Diamond as Big as the Ritz” on the experience.

Ivan Doig was a child in White Sulphur Springs, and though his family occupied a lower end of the economic spectrum, his rich memoir *This House of Sky* sketches the town’s early 20th century life. Doig was born to a Scotsman who followed others from the old country to Montana to herd sheep. Doig colors his family’s life of hardship and privation with the bright and innocent tension of expectations versus hope. There is no better writing about this place in that time.

Decades after Doig left White Sulphur Springs, Howard and Carol Zehntner lived a life not unlike his, wintering cattle (instead of sheep) in a remote drainage of the Little Belts called the Tenderfoot. In 1878, Howard’s grandfather came from Switzerland to homestead and fathered eight children, many of whom have spent their days close to the home place. Ask 71-year-old Howard, whose soft beard of sandy gray curls hangs from an oval face, if he’s been ranching his whole life, and he’ll say, “Not yet.”

For 50 years, Zehntners wintered cows in the forested Tenderfoot drainage. “It wasn’t so tough on cows, but it was tough on humans. Pitching bales of hay to a hundred head of cows, I guess that’s why I feel the way I do now,” Howard says, rubbing sore shoulders.

One year Howard and Carol and their 2-year old daughter Sheryl were snowed in at Tenderfoot from December 10 to May 25.

“First I hated the ranch, then I got grumpy with Howard,” Carol says of that winter, “and pretty soon I couldn’t decide if I liked Sheryl anymore. But then I did. Howard tried to make me go outside every day to ski or something.”

“The snow was just about shirt-pocket deep,” Howard says. “We had to crawl over snowdrifts to go to the toilet.”

“We played cards. We played cribbage a lot,” Carol says. “If it was nice, we went feeding the cows with Howard. We went on lots of hayrides.” Their daughter read books, played with toys and colored like any other 2-year-old, oblivious to her status as a prisoner of the land.

Carol doesn’t grumble. She chose Howard, after all. Born to a native of Sweden who was a trained carpenter — “If I’d have wanted to be a goddamned Swede and a goddamned carpenter I would have stayed there,” he was fond of saying — Carol had the gumption to ask Howard to a girls-ask-boys high school dance.

“His cousin was my best friend,” says Carol, who looks as fresh and lovely as she probably did then. “He didn’t stand a chance. People remind me of that when I’m complaining about him.”

Carol and Howard’s son, Lee, oversees the ranch and guides hunters in the fall. Guiding and outfitting is a big part of White Sulphur Springs’ character. Lee has had bowhunters take three bull elk with Pope and Young scores over 300 points from the same tree stand.



In addition to agriculture, tourism is a big part of the White Sulphur Springs economy. And a big part of the tourism industry centers around the Smith River, a blue-ribbon fishing and floating stream.

He has grave reason to appreciate another of White Sulphur’s significant characteristics. After Lee’s daughter, Robin, was thrown from her vehicle in an accident near Ringling, Lee and his wife spent weeks in Colorado hospitals, hoping for the best. Robin emerged alive. She’s 17 now, quadriplegic, living her life.

“The wreck was on a Saturday, and on Sunday the Catholic church took a collection and had it wired to Denver,” Lee says. “We’re not even Catholic.” Another church found out it would

cost Lee and his family \$3,000 a month to stay in a hospital-affiliated apartment in Denver, raised the money and made the payment. One bake sale brought in \$9,200. The community eventually contributed \$40,000 to Robin's medical care.

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS IS IN MANY WAYS a mountain town, though it doesn't look like one, clustered on a broad plain in a wide valley. In every direction back yards give way directly to ranchland, black Angus cattle gather in creases in the distant grasslands. But the Castle Mountains loom south of town, granite turrets thrusting above a blanket of forest like some condensed medieval kingdom. Behind them stretch the Crazies. To the west the Big Belts seal White Sulphur from the Helena valley, and to the north and east, the Little Belts rise.



Howard Zehntner, 71, and his wife, Carol, have been married 50 years now and live on the ranch Howard's grandfather homesteaded in 1878. The original homestead cabins are still on the ranch, as is the house Howard was born in, at far left in the photo.

Nearby Showdown ski area attracts mountain recreationists all winter, who relax in the mineral pool at the Spa Hot Springs and feed tills at places like the Cornerstone Deli, the Tenderfoot Motel, the Stockman Bar and Barnwood Restaurant, Stageline Pizza — which was born in White Sulphur Springs — Dempsey's Tavern and Fat Momma's Take N Bake. In spring and early summer, thousands of boaters and anglers float between the Belt ranges on the Smith

River, stocking up at Castle Mountain Sports and White Sulphur's two groceries. In the fall, hunters creep through wooded slopes surrounding town, pursuing elk herds, injecting another pulse of cash into local businesses like Dori's Café, where they can pick up ammo and a pair of binocs on the same tab as their bacon and eggs.

So it's a tourist town, but one in which the tourists are mostly Montanans.

David Hanson's clients tend to be from farther away. Hanson's father and grandfather, who homesteaded the family place, aptly illustrate the mash-up of agriculture and recreation that define White Sulphur Springs today. Both ranched and fly fished, a rarity among working cattlemen. Wedged among spreads owned by Russell Stover candy money, Florida's famous Collier family and a French pharmaceutical magnate, lies Hanson's Bar Z Riverside Ranch, and Hansons

have been outfitting fly fishermen for decades on the Smith and on Sheep Creek — where the scenery is so beautiful, Hanson says, anglers often just sit down and stare in awe.

Lanky and sharply handsome, Hanson, who's 30 now, once imagined a more storied life. A talented baseball pitcher, he went to California, dreaming of the bigs. After injury, rehab and more baseball, Hanson landed at Washington State University, determined to "get my education and get fishing." Today he works winters on a ranch in Willow Creek because his boss lets him take summers off to guide anglers, which he's been doing since he was 17.

On a moody day in mid-March, Hanson stalks the upper Smith River on his father's land, looking for places where fast water meets slow. "Huge browns live in this section," Hanson said. "It gets too hot in the summer for rainbows and cutthroat. But the browns get big, 24 to 26 inches."

Hanson is a young man who's already copacetic about where his past has brought him. Baseball didn't happen. Now he's doing exactly what he wants to do: raising cows and catching fish.

"I was lucky enough to like fishing, and to have it work out," Hanson says. "I owe it all to my dad. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be doing this."

Jack Berg is another local who owes his livelihood to his father. On the same day Hanson is casting to brown trout, Berg tinkers with a white-winged 1971 Cadillac hearse. Berg Chevrolet, on the west end of Main Street, is the oldest Chevy dealership in continuous family ownership west of the Mississippi. Changed oil wafts through an open door separat-

ing the garage and the showroom sales counter, where a gallon of gas and a brand new car might be rung up on the same cash register.

The Berg garage in White Sulphur opened in 1929. Berg's grandfather attended the Inland Automobile School in Spokane, where, Berg says, he was certified in the "repair, building and training in the driving of automobile cars.

"He had to take people out and teach them to drive. That was part of the deal. People were going from horse and buggies to automobiles. They were following wagon tracks for the most part. He had the foresight to understand how big automobiles were going to be."

Berg's grandfather also had the foresight to diversify. The current generation of Bergs sell bulk and retail fuel, propane and heating fuel and welding gas. They run a full service repair shop and a wrecker. The garage directly supports four families in town.

That mix will come in handy because, following the collapse of the financial system in 2008, General Motors cut ties with dozens of small dealerships including Berg Chevrolet. The garage's 50 years of steadfast consistency — it lasted through the Great Depression — was not enough.

"We can't figure out why they see it as so expensive to maintain our dealership. Just put us out there in the market and let us compete for product," Berg says. But business execs



The springs that gave the town its name now soothe guests at The Spa Hot Springs Motel. Chelsea Green, shown walking in the pool with her 4-year-old son, Riley, says her son's warts cleared up the morning after his first soak in the pool there. Now they make the 42-mile trip from Townsend about once a month to enjoy the waters.

who have no idea what Berg Chevrolet means here have fed far away numbers into lean algorithms. "If you fall out of the model, you become irrelevant," Berg says.

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS WAS ONCE as close to the seat of the cowboy dream as you can get, the home of Wellington Rankin, who at one time owned the largest ranch landholdings in the state, possibly the whole country. Rankin acquired some of his land from the famous Ringlings, the wealthy circus family, who came to White Sulphur thinking of building a railroad, a dream that withered as sure as visions of timber cash sputtered when the sawmills all left town.

Rankin was an attorney and judge who, in addition to building his ranchland empire, ran for Congress and governor, winning neither office. With his active support, his wife Louise became the second female county attorney in the state. Rankin's sister Jeannette, whom he also avidly supported, was the first woman elected to the U.S. Congress, where she carved out her own remarkable legacy.

Bill Galt and his family inherited what was left — and it



Since the timber industry pulled out in the 1980s, White Sulphur Springs' economy has been tied to agriculture. At left, a crew spays heifer calves on the Galt Ranch west of town.

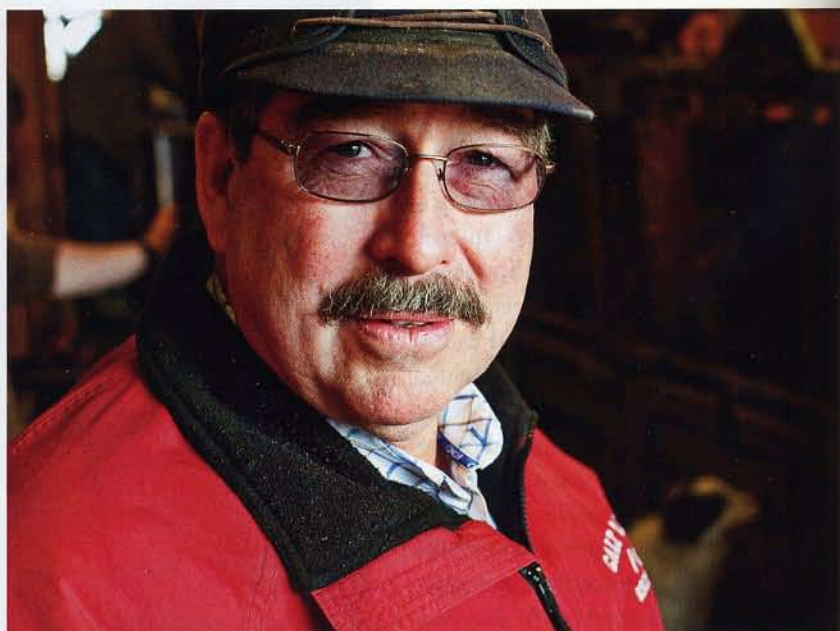
was a lot — of the massive landholdings assembled by Rankin, because Bill's father married Rankin's widow, Louise. And although he inherited no genetic predispositions from the Rankins, Galt seems to have absorbed their willingness to share opinions about how the world should be.

Galt waded into a meltdown at the Mountainview Medical Center, White Sulphur's critical access hospital, during which the facility was so close to financial collapse that another local rancher had to step forward and offer his land to secure a mortgage just so the hospital could make payroll (another remarkable gesture of community beneficence in White Sulphur). Galt joined Mountainview's board of directors and, in concert with other new board members, muscled some unpopular changes. The hospital remained (and remains) operational.

Galt was involved in two of the biggest legal issues in the Smith River valley — a stream access suit that he won, and a lawsuit over groundwater wells, which he did not. He is not afraid to guess out loud about the intellectual capacity of unnamed individuals who have opposed him over the years, but he talks about his wranglings with a wry philosophical bent. He can ride, even with the burrs still under his saddle.

The Galts, Bill and Jill, live big lives. Bill works the ranch with a Bell 206L4 jet helicopter. David McCumber's elegiac *The Cowboy Way* was written about riding herd for Bill in the pre-helicopter days. Animal Planet producers chose the Galts to feature on an upcoming ranching reality TV program. Still the Galts are charming and gracious, quick to help out the community, the kind of folks people seem drawn to. Their children are polite and articulate.

"I came to White Sulphur as part of a constant search to find the perfect area," Jill says. "It seems like the more stunningly beautiful places in Montana have gotten away from the old Montana I grew up in. I love small-town life. I'm a country girl. When your family has roots in a place, you



Bill Galt has been working on the Galt Ranch since he was a high school freshman in 1967. He took over the place in 1979 and raises cattle, hay, and quarter horses.

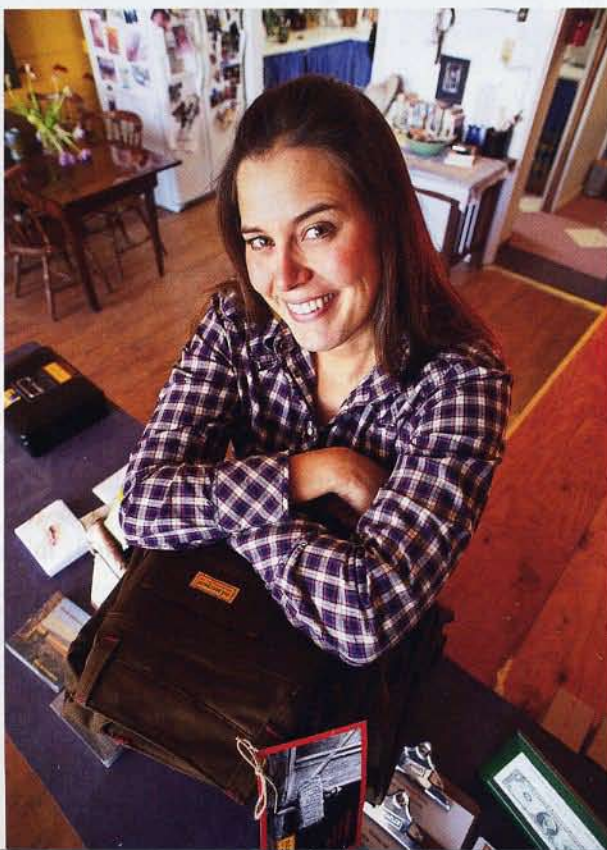
feel like that's the best place to raise your kids."

On an overcast early spring day, Bill tilts his helicopter toward a herd of 300 elk off his pastures. "This is legal," he says into his headset microphone. "I have a license to herd elk from the air, to get them the hell off my ranch."

In the distance the peaks of the Crazies loom above the Castles, a small range dusted with snow. Cattle spill all over the brown and white landscape. Out one window, the willow-lined wander of Birch Creek narrows as the chopper skims over grassland benches toward the timbered highlands. Out the other window, the Smith River slips far down the valley toward the unseen Missouri.

Below the chopper, the elk herd splits and swirls as if whirling in the prop wash. One group heads for a fenceline. "And now they're going to go take out a quarter mile of my fence," Galt says, watching them. But on a Galt ranch, the fences are tight. They hold.

Sarah Calhoun moved to White Sulphur Springs in 2005 and started Red Ants Pants, a company that makes work pants exclusively for women. "I wanted to live in a rural, authentic Montana town," says Calhoun, for whom the Main Street storefront serves as both shop and home.



CATHY AND CALVIN HOCHSTRAT both wandered into White Sulphur from other pasts and met at a dance on New Year's Eve of 1981, a love at first sight thing — "It was, honest to God," Cathy says, a long luxurious braid of hair hanging straight down her back. They married two months and 10 days later. Calvin, a thin man with a warm smile and mutton-chop sideburns, is a farrier, although he's worked cows, driven truck, logged, built houses. Now Calvin shoes horses from May through October — last year he shod over 1,200 horses — and just this last couple of years he's taken the winter off to braid rawhide.

Calvin's grandfather gave him a set of braided reins when he was a kid and, being a kid, he broke them. He could never afford to buy another set, so he turned his mind to making one. "I don't know if it was a good idea or not, but now I'm too hardheaded to quit," Calvin says.

Calvin braids riatas, bosals, quirts, headstalls and reins. A full headstall with reins takes a month to make. "We're talking all day, every day," Calvin says.

Demand for his braiding is growing to the point that he can justify spending the winter months working in his small and beautifully cluttered workshop off the couple's living room. Cathy stays busy raising Bourbon Red turkeys, registered Columbian rams, quarter horses, a few cows and the requisite dog or two, plus she's a brand inspector and a water commissioner — "That's never fun. People know they're out of water, but when you tell them, they're instantly mad," she says — and Cathy has her own artistic outlet.

She hitches dyed horsehair designs, which she sews into leather purses and billfolds she hand-tools. Cathy also hitches horsehair for headstalls that Calvin braids. "We help each other out, but I don't tell him how to make his stuff, and he doesn't tell me how to make mine," she says.

Like the Hochstrats, although many years later, Sarah Calhoun chose White Sulphur as a place to amble into. Originally from back east, Calhoun is 30 years old, attractive, single, smart, irresistibly engaging. Mention her name around town and somebody will say something nice.



After college, Calhoun spent five years bouncing around the West, doing manual labor jobs. In 2004, she was living in Bozeman, sitting in a coffee shop and reading a how-to-start-a-business book when a man asked her what type of business she wanted to start. She told him she wanted to make durable, sturdy work pants

Stevens Youth Center director Bethany Steinken shares a laugh with third-grader Kamarina Girton. Originally from Rapid City, S.D., Steinken says she came to White Sulphur Springs in 2004 as an Americorps volunteer, "and I just loved it and I stayed." Steinken says the youth center operates three afternoons a week and offers local youngsters a safe place to focus on social skills and making healthy choices.

designed specifically for women. Turns out the man had worked in apparel design for 20 years.

"He told me, 'I think you're onto something big, and I think you need to move on it now.' He gave me the courage to jump forward," Calhoun says.

Then a copy of *This House of Sky* somehow fell into her hands. "That book is why I moved here," Calhoun says. She visited White Sulphur, loved what the town evoked in her, saw a building for sale that she could afford and made the decision to set up shop that quickly.

"I knew I wanted to live somewhere rural and agriculture-based," Calhoun, who's from a longline of farmers in Connecticut, says. "There's a neat feel to White Sulphur because you get the swells and rhythms of calving and branding and cows moving up to summer pasture. It's based on seasons, and even if you're not a rancher you sense that feel for natural cycles."

Calhoun spent two years developing Red Ants Pants, using herself and her college roommate for the curvy- and straight-cut models, tweaking features until she was satisfied, then launched in 2006. Today she sells pants via the Internet all across the country and in Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Australia, even Antarctica. Last year, in some of the

worst economic conditions since the Great Depression, Red Ants Pants sales were up 40 percent.

And she's poured almost that much energy back into White Sulphur Springs. She volunteers on the ambulance crew, coached junior high volleyball and worked on the chamber of commerce and another community economic development board. "I think it's really important when you invest in a town to feel like you have a responsibility to that place to some degree," Calhoun says.

"I love the idea of community. When I was living in Bozeman, I was hanging out with same-age people who had the same tastes in music and politics and everything, which is great, but I missed having an old man friend and being around those junior high volleyball players. I missed diversity, not so much in race or color, but in different perspectives on life. And the community has been so wonderful, just so much support. It's a classic small town."

Classic like a great tale or a song that reminds you of a time from before, a time we wish we still had some access to — laced by whiffs of old engine oil, the pliant bend of dressed leather, the lowing of cattle at sunset, all carried as if by a twilight breeze into the life we're living today. ■