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EPILOGUE: PROGRESSIVE POPULISM'S GLORY DAYS

Rick Applegate

So we have come now to the end of the stories, and we may be tempted to put down the book and move on. Yet, it is hard for me to tuck this one away on a shelf, not only because it has been an unexpectedly welcome tour—a rewarding journey, political and personal—but also because it has pulled its authors, and now its readers, toward a fuller understanding of a relatively recent and vitally important chunk of Montana's political history.

Stories of this kind are necessarily partial and selective, laying out only some of the standout events that are dug up from the complex times and deeds of the participants. This compilation does not, and never was envisioned to, deal with the worst events in the history of the Great Plains or of the larger West, including the shameful displacement and destruction of the indigenous cultures, or the near-extinction of the bison. Our failure to understand these parts of our past determines how much of our history gets written and understood.

The winners of history's battles get to pick the words that endure. And sometimes those words gloss over, even conceal, what is most important—at least for a time. But here, with their focus on the efforts and accomplishments of the late 1960s and 1970s, the words are revealing. And while these are stories with a strong measure of success in their outcomes, there was nothing certain or easy about the Montana Constitutional Convention, or the era that produced stronger environmental protections, or any of the impressive public actions on other issues detailed here.

In the essays included here, we can see instances of an emerging and recurring spirit that we might accurately term progressive populism. And we have a first-hand account of what can be accomplished when people of good will rise to seemingly insurmountable challenges, small and large; to advocate or object; and to collectively attempt to do good—not just for themselves or their clenched ideologies, but for the broader public interest.

And the events of the late 1960s and early 1970s are helpful as we struggle to meet the challenges ahead. They reveal what can result from a reasonably deliberative and civil public arena, one that we can hope will resurface from our troubled and divided times.

Win or lose, none of these public-spirited moments ever go away. And indeed, they will remind all of us that the capacity to take informed public action with others is among the supreme virtues of any life well lived.

As the writers here all know, there is much work yet to be done on all these issues. Each of these stories contains an element of unfulfilled promise. The Montana Constitution's solemn declaration of the right to a clean and healthful environment did not make it so. That promising language sits there, waiting to be applied, as the planet warms at an alarming rate to the detriment of generations to come. The Constitution's equal rights and non-discrimination provisions have not ended discrimination, nor left us in a place of flawless equality. Openness in government will always require the harsh light of quality journalism and occasionally the judicious application of legal crowbars.

Of course, the political dynamics of the state have noticeably shifted in the difficult and dismaying days of the current century. But the progressive impulse—at, near, or even below the surface—will likely never vanish from the state or recede into anachronistic dormancy.

It can be seen in the resistance to encroachments and abuses of all kinds—whether the colossally misbegotten, bankruptcy-challenged fate of the hard-fought developments at Colstrip; or the expensive failure of Montana's first descent into utility deregulation; or the misplaced efforts to undermine stream protections and public land access; the incessant and accelerating habitat-reducing pressure of small ranchettes and opulent second homes throughout the forests and gorgeous valleys of the state; or any one of a host of other ravaging proposals that may arise—and which too often have had to be beaten down by conscientious citizens or legislators, or batted away by the veto of governors.

We all know that Montana continues to struggle in highly charged battles as the urge for unbridled economic development squares off against the push for sensible restraints. It always will, and it will continue to define the direction of the future of the state.

And there will always be unfinished business. Plenty of it. It is the stuff of contemporary public life. All the remaining issues must for now be addressed in a time of coarsened and unusually vile exchanges, a public discourse where too much of what was once deemed intolerable and unworthy is now at the swirling center of our public lives.

The ultimate weight of the reflections collected here may depend on whom you ask about them. At minimum, they are a rare chance to look more deeply into a fundamentally informative part of Montana's past.

At the end of the day, though, I think this collection will endure the test of time. It lays out an eye-popping period in Montana history that has so much to recommend it, so much to make us want to remain engaged in public life, and to take action. The stories, all true, are not trivial. They are the guts of what we need to know, and they indeed remind us of what good people, working together, are capable.

This compilation demonstrates what was done through collaboration and hard work. It also provides instruction, and a template for future generations—to restore the ability to speak and work together for a common goal and to never give up, and to retain the sense of purpose we all experienced in those efforts, which we now so fondly remember.

The “Glory Days” were not an aberrant occurrence. There never was an easy path to improve our society, and none of the actions described in the book came without effort. Often, it took several attempts to come close to progress. Success came in stages, with reversals along the way, as a result of unflagging determination. Every one of the achievements recorded in this book stems from the kind of dogged optimism we still need today.

We have offered this reflection on the past to illuminate the path forward for future generations. If these accounts can motivate others to make the effort, Montanans will be on solid footing to better meet the challenges of the years ahead.

Montana has been called “The Last Best Place,” an ambitious moniker. There will always be the need to re-earn such a high perch. Facing, knowing, and learning from the good and bad realities of the past may help refresh and perhaps justify that claim. We are left to hope that will be the case.