PAGES
OF
TIME

A HISTORY
OF
PETEDEMA COUNTY,
MONTANA

By Petedema County and Field Library
Pages of Time

Published 1989 Montana's Centennial Edition Vol. 1

A

History

of

Petroleum County,

Montana

By Petroleum County Public Library
In addition to many fine private donations, the Petroleum County Public Library received a State of Montana centennial grant of $500 to support the publishing of this book.

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A Tribute

It seems appropriate for a history sponsored by a library to pay tribute to the parents and educators who worked diligently under the most adverse circumstances to educate the young people of an undeveloped area.

There were many fine teachers who lived in lonely teacherages or boarded in crowded family homestead shacks. They taught from one to eight grades in a drafty schoolroom, built fires, carried water, put on plays and box socials, and seldom ventured more than a mile or two from their schools for the entire term.

Dedicated educators, however, were not limited to the homestead days. All through the years, teachers and administrators have been willing to come to isolated communities and give their best in spite of fewer social opportunities and physical comforts. Parents still must make personal sacrifices to assure their children of educational and cultural opportunities.

In the very early years of the development of its school system, Petroleum County was fortunate indeed to have an educator of unusual grit and determination — a fine teacher as well as an excellent administrator — a person who unwaveringly fought to provide and improve educational opportunities for every child. This person taught six-week sessions in remote areas rather than see the area go unserved, coached mothers whose children had no formal school to attend, begged and borrowed materials to begin a high school, and left no stone unturned in her search for school financing. This lady was Amanda Swift.

Miss Swift was born (1870) and educated in Maine. She displayed all of those characteristics commonly associated with the Maine-New Englander — brusque, frank, unfrivolous, independent, stern but gentle. She was a person undaunted by criticism, with dry humor, and of strict and uncompromising principles. Her credentials allowed her to teach grades 1-12.

Miss Swift was hired in 1913 to come to Winnett to teach a regular eight-months' term in the elementary school and, in addition, to teach during the summer months wherever there was a need. She soon recognized the need for instruction beyond grade eight and voluntarily began to offer high school instruction to a small group of older students.

In 1914 she ran for the office of county superintendent of schools in Fergus County, which, of course, included what is now Petroleum County. She was defeated but ran again in 1918 and was elected for a two-year term. She served another term beginning in 1920. In 1925 she became Petroleum County's first county superintendent of schools.

Four incidents of which Miss Swift wrote in an article entitled "Origin and Progress of the Schools of Winnett" perhaps better portray her character than anything another might write. The stories have been edited for clarity.

The first incident concerns Miss Swift's resolute effort to gather every possible name for the District #159 school census in about 1916.

"Being determined not to miss a single name since the per capita apportionment from the state was large, upon meeting two riders I questioned them regarding the people living in a distant shack. I was assured that a man with a large family lived there, but that I'd have to be severe with him as he disapproved entirely of education and would object to giving the names and ages of the children."

"With determined, stern mien, I rode over the hills to the cabin door and demanded the children’s names of
Preface

For a number of years the Petroleum County Public Library has been interested in collecting and preserving local history. Past issues of the Winnett Times have been bound and made available to the public, and books of local and Montana history have been purchased. The Montana Historical Society microfilmed its collection of Winnett newspapers and gave the Winnett library the original editions. Rudy and Bernice Glatz generously donated their personal copies of some missing years of the Winnett Times. The library was thus able to complete its file of the paper from 1921 to the present. These newspapers are the core of our local history. The masthead of the early Winnett Times was used as a basis for the design of the title page and chapter headings of this book.

In 1979 several library volunteers began taping interviews with some of the county’s older residents. It quickly became evident, however, that the library did not have the resources to pay for the transcription and typing of extensive interviews, and it was a very time-consuming project for the few volunteers. Instead of concentrating on oral interviews with a few people, it seemed more practical to try to contact a greater number of individuals through written questionnaires, and to begin to systematically collect information for family files on all of Petroleum County’s residents. On October 4, 1985, the Diamond Jubilee of the Winnett Post Office, 1,000 questionnaires were mailed to former and present residents. An excellent response was received, and permanent files were established in the library. About the same time, indexing of the early Winnett Times began.

When projects for Montana’s 1989 centennial celebration were being considered, many people suggested a book be written about Petroleum County. In April 1987, the public library board of trustees voted to sponsor the writing of such a history book. From the beginning, it was hoped the book could be more than a collection of homestead memories. The goal of the trustees was to publish a book which would outline the entire history of the Petroleum County area and one which would become a reliable reference for factual information about the county.

Volunteers were invited to participate in collecting and recording the history of each section of the county. A number of people worked diligently on this phase of the project. It was impossible, of course, to establish exact community boundaries because of shifting population, changing schools and road improvements. The library editing committee ultimately decided to divide the county into 11 communities based primarily upon early post office locations. These communities became the 11 chapters of Pages of Time. (See map on following page.)

Each chapter of the book is introduced by a sectional map showing schools, post offices, streams, and present-day roads in relation to section and township lines. Schools and post offices were very often started in people’s homes and were frequently moved from homestead to homestead. The most commonly remembered location is the location used on the chapter maps.

Readers need to keep in mind that there is a unique system for numbering sections within a township. A section is one square mile, a township is 36 square miles. The sections are numbered beginning with number one in the upper right hand corner of the township and progressing to the left for six sections, thus 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1; the next row begins with 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12; the next 18, 17, 16, 15, 14, 13. A key to this number system can be found on the following page.

When the information was available, each early landowner was identified by section, township and range. A name in the text will read: SMITH, John (Sec 6-14-26) The reader can quickly identify the location of the landowner by looking at the chapter map and finding Section 6, Township 14 North, Range 26 East. The format and abbreviations are uniform throughout the book. In many instances, of course, people acquired additional land, moved to new locations, or abandoned their original property. The land description of the owner’s first recorded deed is used in this book, and no attempt has been made to include other land acquisitions. It should be noted, the term “homesteader” is often used in a very general sense in the text. A brief description of various land acts is given in the Introduction to help the reader better understand the complicated nature of various forms of land acquisition.

The spelling of proper names presented special problems to the library’s editing committee. Whenever possible, personal names are spelled as they appeared on official documents — deeds, school census, voting lists, etc. However, a man may be listed as William on a deed, Bill on a school census, and W. L. on a voting list — with many other small deviations caused by improper deciphering of poor handwriting, typographical errors and careless copying. We ask your indulgence for errors which have crept in.

It was equally difficult to determine the proper spelling of place names. Typical examples are McDonald Creek, MacDonald Creek or Macdonald Creek; Lodge Pole or Lodgepole; Grass Range or Grassrange; Ford Creek or Fords Creek. The decision was made to use the official
name of each post office as it was spelled when the post office was designated by the U. S. Post Office Department, and to consistently use that spelling in any reference to the community. An interesting sidelight came to the committee’s attention concerning the use of two-word names for post offices. From approximately 1895 until 1908, the postal department did not sanction the use of any two-word names for post offices. This perhaps explains the reason Grassrange is one word on official post office records.

Musselshell was spelled Muscleshell or Muscle Shell by Lewis and Clark and many other early explorers. Muscleshell City at the mouth of the Musselshell River in the 1860s used the old spelling, but the later post office of Fort Musselshell at the same location used the newer spelling. On modern maps the spelling of the town near Roundup, the county, and the river is Musselshell. Note also the interesting story concerning the naming of McDonald Creek in the introduction to the Teigen chapter.

Dates can be as confusing and as controversial as spelling. Post office dates are an excellent example. Necessity often dictated that mail was picked up and delivered to certain points before an official post office was designated by the U. S. Post Office Department. In fact, according to an article in the Winnett Times, the official post office at Winnett in 1910 was established after a six-month count of mail delivered there. In some instances a postmaster was appointed before official sanction was given for a post office. All of the dates for post offices in this book are based upon the official U. S. government date of designation.

Dates for land transactions are likewise sometimes deceiving. In many cases, land changed hands and deeds were executed, but the deeds were not officially recorded for several years. In addition, people often lived on a property for a number of years before a former mortgage was satisfied, so legal transfer of the land was delayed.

Certain abbreviations are uniformly used throughout the book. Because the Winnett Times was a major source of information, reference to quotations from the newspaper take the following abbreviated form: (W.T. 6-1-21). In unabbreviated form, it would read: "Quoted from the Winnett Times, June 1, 1921." Birth dates and birth years are handled in a similar manner. A date in parentheses following a name indicates year of birth, e. g., "John Smith (6-11-33)."

If a person or family lived in more than one community in Petroleum County, the individual is usually listed in each community and referred from one area to another. This method was used in order to keep individual community histories accurate and complete.

The amount of information and the number of pictures printed for a family is proportionate to the quantity and quality of information which could be garnered. In some cases little more than a person’s name was available; in others it was not possible to print all of the material submitted. A name in parentheses following an article indicates the material was submitted by that person. The Petroleum County library assumes no responsibility for opinions or material submitted by private individuals.

The present library board is committed to the continuation of a project to collect, file, and store local history. Family files which were established in 1985 will be preserved and updated. Source material for this book will be permanently on file, and an obituary file will be maintained.

Pages of Time could not have been written without the cooperation and support of hundreds of people. It is impossible to list all those who volunteered both time and expertise to see this project completed.

A note of appreciation is due those who contributed money as an outright gift, as an honorarium, or as a memorial to family or friends. A list of donors and those memorialized or honored can be found following the final chapter. Our heartfelt thanks to all of you!

Board of Trustees
Petroleum County Community Library

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the mild-appearing puzzled man who stood there, lathered, ready to shave — evidently in preparation for a Saturday outing. The lathered face gave a grotesque appearance as he insisted vehemently he had no names to give. As he protested, he advanced waving the razor in his earnestness. I, as rapidly, reined my horse back, wondering how I should get those worthwhile names from the man who didn’t seem as insane as righteously and profanely indignant. He insisted he was a lone bachelor. Finally I realized that the riders had jobbed me, and I returned to the main trail sadder and wiser!"

The second incident relates to Miss Swift’s campaign efforts on behalf of Jeannette Rankin who successfully ran for the U. S. House of Representatives in 1916 and became the first woman to sit in the U. S. Congress. A Grassrange man is alleged to have said to Amanda: "I know you, lady. you’re that consarned schoolmarm from Winnett that got so mad in 1916 because the people wouldn’t make up a party and hire one of the few cars in Winnett to attend the afternoon tea in Lewistown for Jeannette Rankin. You said you’d go with your horse and get there in time for the 4 o’clock speaking, and you left at 3 a.m. Some of us Grass Range Missouri Democrats thought we’d like to hear a candidate speak that could make one ride that distance to hear her. We made up a mixed party and went to hear her, and by gum, we voted for her, too! I heard afterwards you tired out this horse of yours riding round the country talking for her, and then wore out all the horses you could borrow of your friends!”

The third incident concerns Miss Swift’s determined struggle to gain accreditation for a high school in Winnett. The year is believed to be 1918.

"We waited vainly for word from the State Board of Education at its conference in Helena. Finally I decided to go on the stage to Grassrange and take the early Saturday train to our Capitol. The stage driver, however, told me that the melting of the two-foot June snow had so risen the creeks that roads were impassable, and he couldn’t make it with his car, but he thought by keeping my horse to the hills and higher land I might make it. I went to Teigen that Friday night. They roused me for an early breakfast and started me with much advice about the ride. Coming near the Bowman place, I encountered what seemed to be a lake. The man there said, 'Go right ahead. 'Tisn’t deep. I brought my horse thru it last night.' Evidently the water had risen overnight, for soon my horse was swimming, and I was a frightened individual clinging desperately to the saddle horn and the Boston bag containing all my precious documents and duplicates of school records.

The horse swam through, and I came to the waiting train a bedraggled straggler in the long riding skirt of those days. I tried to repair my appearance in Lewistown and was soon on my way to Helena on the train. Because of the rising of the creeks and the continued rain, the train had to make detours, and in one place the passengers walked over a mile.

"I was a little late to the meeting, and as I stood at the entrance I heard the Hobson representative explain that Winnett contained just a mere handful of people — that this idea of a high school there was just the wishful thinking of the teacher, one of those damn Yankees from New England, trying to figure out a job for herself. The man from Moore declared it would rob the three fine high schools of Fergus County (Lewistown, Moore and Hobson) to start a high school out in the woods. (Deluded man! He just didn’t know Winnett was over 25 miles from the timber and only painful effort got us wood to burn!)

"The state superintendent replied that she, too, felt such applications should be treated with greatest distrust and very critical and searching investigation. (The lady was a good politician and vote getter and realized 'twas a time to make good with the delegations from three flourishing towns of Fergus County.) Thereupon Leon Foote, her deputy, arose and put in a plea for Winnett. Principal Cummings of Lewistown, our friend, testified as to the genuineness of the statement of Mr. Foote but he deemed it wiser to defer the accrediting, although he presented the implication of the Hobson man that the teacher was working for a job for herself — at any time he stood ready to engage her at Fergus County High School.

"I stood rooted to the floor, dismayed, disheartened, yet so angered by all the camouflage and outright falsities that I bolted in at last, presented my papers and records, told how I found out from my county superintendent in Lewistown that all the records that had been given to her by me had been demanded from her by the same people who went to Helena. She claimed they only wished to examine the papers and then would forward them to Helena. They had not done this, hence, a statement by one of the board that I hadn’t complied with the request to file all records with the county superintendent. She in turn was to forward the records to Helena with her comments and recommendations. After a fiery, tempestuous presentation of facts, I was delighted to have Principal Cummings withdraw his motion to defer the accrediting and heartily move the prompt accrediting.

"The Board of Education voted unanimously to accredit: the $5000 state appropriation due us was made. I returned to Winnett a hero for the time being..."

One final quote reflects Miss Swift’s stubborn refusal to compromise her personal standards. It is suspected the strong-willed county superintendent in the following episode was none other than Amanda herself. She wrote: "A teacher in the north country, desirous of getting a ride with the county superintendent into Winnett one Friday night. In her haste, transferred most of the contents of her rouge box to her cheeks with somewhat appalling results. Surveying the result, the superintendent had her kneel on the bank of Box Elder Creek and scrub off part of the offending red before she would consent to introduce her to the rather critical Winnett faculty."

To Amanda and the educators who came after her, God Bless You.
1805 Lewis and Clark camp at the mouth of the "Muscle Shell" River (May 20).
1833 Karl Bodmer, artist traveling with Prince Maximilian, travels past mouth of Musselshell River (July 28). Portfolio includes pen and ink sketches and water colors of "Les Mauvaises Terres" or badlands.
1846 Father Nicholas Point produces lithograph of bison hunting in the "Muscle Shell mountains."
1859 First steamboat passes mouth of Musselshell River.
1860 Lt. John Mullins, Ferdinand Hayden and William Bridger explore area between Missouri and Yellowstone rivers. Diary account of crossing Musselshell River in southern Petroleum County (July 27-28).
1861 Civil War begins.
Eastern Montana is part of Dakota territory.
1862 Homestead Land Act signed by President Lincoln.
Gold rush to Bannack in western Montana.
1863 Montana part of Idaho territory.
1864 Eight counties (Beaverhead, Big Horn, Choteau, Dawson, Deer Lodge, Jefferson, Madison, Missoula) designated in Montana portion of Idaho territory (Jan. 16).
Montana Territory created (May 26).
1865 President Lincoln assassinated (April 14).
1866 Short-lived trading post known as Kerchival City established at the mouth of the Musselshell River.
1869 Captain Clift surveys wagon trail from Helena to mouth of the Musselshell River, but road not developed.
1873 Peter Koch builds trading post (Fort Sherman) on Spring Creek near present-day Lewistown.
1874 Trading post established by Diamond R Company at Carroll on the Missouri River and trail developed to connect Carroll and Helena. Detachment of troops to protect route garrisoned at Camp Lewis on Spring Creek.
1876 Colonel George A. Custer defeated by Indians on the Little Big Horn River.
1877 Chief Joseph flees across central Montana toward Canada.
1879 Gold discovered in the Judith Mountains
1880 Fort Maginnis established.
Granville Stuart's diary documents overnight stop at Flatwillow crossing.
Northern Pacific railroad enters eastern Montana.
1881 Reedsfort Post Office established near present Lewistown.
Large influx of cattle to central Montana.
1882 Northern Pacific railroad reached Billings (Aug. 19).
1883 Flatwillow, Grassrange and Musselshell receive official post office designation.
1884 Lewistown Post Office designated.
Central Montana vigilantes operating.
1885 Fergus County formed.
Flatwillow roundup gathers 46,800 cattle.
1886 Dry summer followed by early severe winter brings disaster to the cattle business.
1887 Railroad reaches Great Falls.
Twenty-two steamboats deliver goods to Fort Benton during season.
1888 Only three steamboats dock at Fort Benton during season.
1889 STATE OF MONTANA admitted to union on November 8.
1890 Fort Maginnis abandoned.
1892 Roy Post Office designated.
1898 Vincent Post Office established serving lower Musselshell area.
1899 School District #26 (Flatwillow) created.
1900 Edgewater Post Office established.
Billy Calder hanged for murder on lower Flatwillow Creek (Mar. 16).
1901 Weede and Kismet post offices established.
1903 Valentine Post Office established.
Railroad arrives at Lewistown (Oct. 30).
1904 Mosby Post Office established.
1905 Ross Post Office established.
1907 Home school opens in Walter Winnett's residence.
1908 Railroad arrives at Melstone, Musselshell and Roundup.
1909 Enlarged Homestead Land Act enacted.
1910 Winnett Post Office designated.
1911 Smith and Parkinson post offices designated.
1912 Three-year Homestead Act enacted.
Sinking of Titanic (April 15).
Winnett's "little white schoolhouse" constructed.
1913 Railroad arrives at Grassrange (Aug.). Ashley, Fort Musselshell and Kelley post offices designated.
1914 Teigen and Blakeslee post offices designated.
Town of Winnett platted.
First issue of Winnett Times (Sept. 2).
Railroad to Roy.
Women granted right to vote in Montana.

1915 Staff, Welter, Mecaaha and Fermus post offices designated.
First Winnett High School classes held in Moll building.

1916 Dovetail, Hoyle and Jitney post offices open.
Prohibition in Montana.
School District #159 (Winnett) created.

1917 Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad arrives in Winnett (Oct. 10).
Winnett High School held in Eager building.
Burgeton and Druett post offices open.
U. S. enters World War I.

1918 Doughty Post Office designated.
World War I ends (Nov. 11).
Drought discourages homesteaders.

1919 Uebra Post Office designated.
9.73 inches precipitation recorded at Flatwillow for the year; 6.82 at Valentine.
Early hard winter begins in October.
Winnett Elementary School in new stucco building.

1920 Oil discovered at Cat Creek (Feb. 20).
1921 Petrolia Post Office established.
Combined Winnett elementary and high school building completed.

1922 Cat Creek and Bervie post offices open.
Radio coming in loud and clear in Winnett’s Palm Garden restaurant.

1923 103 Montana banks fail.
Population of Cat Creek estimated at 500
Basketball boys go to State tourny.

1924 Winnett Times advertisement: Ford Touring Car, $295 F.O.B. Detroit; Demountable rim and starter, $85 extra.
Vote to create Petroleum County 891 for, 235 against (Nov. 4).
Teigen Store burns.

1925 Petroleum County becomes legal entity (Feb. 24).
Postal rates: 2 cents per ounce for letters and personal postcards. 1 cent for government postcards.
Law passed restricting bulls running at large between January 1 and July 1.

1926 Carload of horses shipped from Winnett; carload of tractors shipped into Winnett.
Many sheep lost in devastating snowstorm in September.
First Flatwillow Hall burns.

1927 Annual precipitation at Flatwillow, 15.4 inches; at Valentine 14.07 inches.
32,530 gallons of cream shipped from Winnett during year.
Girls’ basketball team wins first in tournament by defeating Roundup 18-11.

1928 Carload of turkeys shipped to market from Winnett.
1126 voters registered in Petroleum County.

1929 First “talkie” movies shown in Winnett (June).
New York stock market crashes (Oct. 29).

2000 range horses gathered and shipped from Winnett.
Annual precipitation at Flatwillow, 9.4 inches; at Valentine 9.9 inches.
439 rattlesnakes killed in three dens near Kelley.
Fire destroys entire city block in Winnett.

1930 Farmers and Merchants Bank of Winnett closes (Jan. 24).
Farm census figures for Petroleum County: farms, 363; horses, 6427; cattle, 9896; hogs, 960; corn produced, 6162 bushels; wheat, 129,428 bushels.

1931 Authorities arrest Melstone man for bringing in 22 gallons of gin, alcohol and moon. "a la medicine wagon style."

1932 Franklin D. Roosevelt elected president.

1933 Four-day bank "holiday" declared by President Roos evelt.
Prohibition repealed.

1934 Automobile license plate numbers assigned to countries based on population, Petroleum County #55.
State liquor store opens in Woods Drugstore in Winnett — whiskey $1.10 a pint; gin $1.00 a pint, $1.50 a quart.
Yellow Water Grazing District first grazing district formed in county.
Twenty-four government aid programs listed in Winnett Times.

1935 CCC camp constructed in Winnett (Sept.)
118 students enroll for high school.
U. S. Social Security Act adopted
Construction of Fort Peck Dam begins.

1936 WPA program wages war on Mormon crickets and grasshoppers.
Construction commences on Yellow Water Dam
Roy Ayers elected governor.

1937 Resettlement program buys about 21,000 acres from destitute homesteaders, plants 3000 acres of crested wheat.
Winnett boxers win 5 of 14 state trophies!

1938 1300 pounds of navy beans received by local relief office.

1939 20,000 acres of tax dead land appraised and sold by county for as little as 50 cents per acre.

1940 Women gain right to serve on juries in Montana.
Eager Mercantile advertises Choice T-Bone Steak, 28 cents per pound.
Grassrange-Lewistown highway oiled.

1941 McDonald Creek bridge south of Winnett completed.
County owns 120,000 acres of land which was taken for taxes.
U. S. declares war on Japan (Dec. 7) and on Germany and Italy (Dec. 11).

1942 Petroleum County voters choose county manager form of government by 2-1 vote.
Livestock association recommends wages for ranch workers at $60 per month plus board and
room. Under war rationing, Petroleum County allotted 3 tires, 3 tubes for January.
35-mile-per-hour wartime speed limit goes into effect.

1943 Office of Price Administration rations canned goods, shoes, sugar, coffee, gas, tires, meat.
Eager Mercantile and Winnett Mercantile discontinue delivery service to customers.

1944 Over 9 inches of rain recorded in month of June.
Mini oil boom at Cat Creek with oil production from deeper sands.
Petroleum County farm census: 161 farms, 29,901 sheep, 14,676 cattle, 2,634 horses.

1946 Contract signed between REA and City Light Company.
Rattlesnake Butte oil well flows.
Petrolium townsite (63.3 acres) sold for $4.50 per acre.

1947 W. G. Roberts receives a record high 24 cents per lb. for 1,400-pound steer.
Wiggins reports 3.15 inches of rain in a May thunderstorm.

1948 8.48 inches of precipitation recorded at Flatwillow from May 1 to June 17.
REA begins service in county.

1949 Jan. 1 to Feb. 15 coldest six-week period ever recorded at Flatwillow weather station.
Newly completed rodeo grounds called best in state by John Tunnicliff, rodeo stock supplier.

1950 Petrolium Reservoir project approved.
Population of Winnett 390; of Petroleum County, 1,026.
First Petroleum County ambulance put into service.

1951 New high school building completed.
Martha Hamilton leaves $5,000 to public library.
KOOK TV of Billings first television station in eastern Montana.

1952 1-cent postcard becomes a thing of the past.
1953 Borrowers interest rate at 5 percent.

1954 First television set in Winnett at C. V. Allen’s.
440-pound calf tops market at $25 cwt.
State Highway Department builds 28’ x 36’ metal garage in Winnett.

1955 April snowstorm breaks all records!
1956 Daily railroad freight service discontinued (Jan. 14).
Soil Bank Act approved.

1957 State Theta Rho assembly in Winnett.
Butte Hotel on Main Street demolished.
County builds new shop 40’ x 100’.

1958 County library opens in former SCS building.
First Winnett High School reunion held.

1959 $18,051 Fred Robinson bridge completed.
Burt Sisters telephone exchange sold to Mid-Rivers Telephone Cooperative.

1960 Hebgen Dam earthquake rocks Petroleum County.
Petroleum County population is 889.
Dial phone service inaugurated, local switchboard closes.

1961 State takes over Highway #244 from Winnett to Roundup.
40-year-old oil pipeline between Cat Creek and Winnett is removed.
Work started on Flatwillow Creek bridge between Mosby and Melstone.

1962 New mercury-vapor street lights installed in Winnett.
High school enrollment, 56; elementary, 82, 320 individuals take Sabin oral polio vaccine at Petroleum County courthouse.

1963 Farm census shows 11,765 sheep, 21,508 cattle, 871 horses in Petroleum County.
Second Winnett High School reunion.

Winnett Times celebrates its fiftieth anniversary with a special historic edition.

1965 Petroleum County loses county representation in the state legislature due to reapportionment.
Winnett depot closes.

1966 Boys’ basketball team has exceptional season — average 66.7 points per game for 28 games as opposed to 45.6 points for opponents.
First school bus routes established (Petrolium).
New bridge over McDonald Creek on East Main.

1967 144 Theta Rho members attend State Assembly in Winnett.
Fresh juicy oranges, 8 pounds for 95 cents.
Boys’ basketball team goes to State.

1968 First-class postage rate increases to 6 cents for regular mail, 10 cents for airmail, 5 cents for postcards.
High school enrollment 465, elementary 105.

1969 All school districts in county consolidated with District #159.
Moon landing — WHS graduate Ralph Tripp is project director for lunar module “Eagle.”
Winnett High School reunion.

1970 Census reveals 630 residents in county, 249 occupied housing units, 202 with bathrooms.

1971 18-year-olds win right to vote in Montana. First story hour in Winnett library.
New post office building opens in Montana.

1972 Montana holds Constitutional Convention to write new constitution.
Last train to Winnett (Sept. 8).
Interest at Federal Land Bank 7½ percent

1973 New elementary school building and gymnasium completed.
Joint elementary-high school-public library initiated.
1974  Calf prices slump to 28 cents per pound for steer calves.
      Ramettes basketball team takes fourth place at state tournament.
1975  Eight bridges on McDonald and Flatwillow creeks receive major damage from flood water in May.
      All Mid-Rivers telephone lines in county to be buried.
      Ramettes take third place at state basketball tourney.
1976  Teigen schoolhouse dedicated as pioneer school at Symmes Park in Lewistown.
      Two miles of Petrolia main canal lined with concrete.
1977  Senior Citizen Center in basement of Petroleum County courthouse officially opened.
      Jack Hansen and Bud Arthur ship out 200 live rattlesnakes.
      15,673 books and media items loaned from Petroleum County Community Library in 1977.
1978  Flood damage in Petroleum County and town of Winnett is $263,115 from tornado-like storm on July 2.
1979  Calf prices hit $1.00 per pound.
      Clear viewing for solar eclipse (Feb. 26).
1980  Mount St. Helen's eruption covers county with ash.
      State Board of Education meets in Winnett.
      New swimming pool constructed.
      Musselshell and Petroleum counties declared drought disaster area.
1981  New sewer lagoons constructed for town of Winnett.
      Borrowing rate of interest 18 to 20 percent.
1982  Town of Winnett receives $359,270 grant for water system.
      Sisters sue sheriff for being evicted from bar.
1983  Soil Conservation Ordinance in Petroleum County passes 172-111.
      Wayne Bratten leaves 1.5 million dollars in trust to Petroleum County.
1984  Bratten Memorial Scholarship Fund established.
      Petroleum County aids in fighting Hawk Creek fire in Bull Mountains.
      Interest rates 12.5 to 14 percent on farm loans.
1985  Local residents resent Harvard University study which lists Petroleum County as the second ‘hungriest’ county in nation.
      CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) farm bill enacted.
1986  Last issue of Winnett Times (Jan. 2); first issue of Roundup Record-Tribune and Winnett Times (Jan. 8).
      Petroleum County receives $9842 from state for grasshopper control.
1987  Mail route established in Petrolia area.
      Grasshoppers strip county second year in a row.
1988  8.98 inches of rain in Billings for entire year.
      Yellowstone Park ravaged by fire.
1989  MONTANA STATE CENTENNIAL.
Pages of time...
Introduction

Petroleum County is March roaring in like a lion, lambing sheds full of bleating sheep, two-year-old heifers waiting impatiently in corrals unsure of the stirrings within them, and old cows seeking shelter in the willows. It is soft spring winds with the smell of damp sage, V's of honking geese, and meadowlarks who sing as though they alone discovered spring. It is the taste of fresh rhubarb and new-grown asparagus. It is seeding and branding and watching the sky for June rains. It is hope.

Petroleum County is cloudless broad skies and new-mown hay, and black rolling thunderclouds shaking fingers of lightning at those who dare to venture forth. It is August and dry hot winds that wither the grass with dust devils teasing and skipping away. It is fear — fear of prairie fires and drought and grasshoppers and debt. It is utter discouragement.

Petroleum County is bountiful harvests and fat lambs and calves. It is chokecherry syrup and bright orange pumpkins and huge harvest moons. It is the first snowfall quietly covering the harshness of the landscape. It is long evenings and howling coyotes and northern lights. It is nights filled with millions of stars, and galaxies for those who search for them. It is acceptance of life.

Petroleum County is wind and blizzards, and worry for man and beast alike. It is the unmistakable blue of chinook clouds. It is everything that is beautiful. — mwk —

Petroleum County encompasses 1,064,950 acres of land or approximately 1680 square miles. (The state of Rhode Island contains only 1214 square miles!) All the streams in the county drain eastward to the Musselshell River, thence northward into the Missouri. The rolling plains become rough river breaks as they approach the two rivers. Much of the soil is heavy clay, clay and silt loams, or fine sandy loam. Altitude ranges from 2950 feet at Winnett to the normal pool level of Fort Peck Reservoir at 2246 feet.

The climate in Petroleum County is semi-arid, marked by cold winters, occasionally as low as 50 below zero, and warm-to-hot summers which sometimes reach 110 degrees. The average yearly precipitation is 12.75 inches. Thunderstorms and hail are not uncommon, and winter blizzards with fierce winds can develop quickly and last for several days. The country is located in what is commonly referred to as the chinook belt, where warm downslope winds can cause temperatures to fluctuate as much as 40 degrees in less than one hour.

The capricious nature of the weather was typified in December of Montana's Centennial Year of 1989. Twenty-four inches of snow fell in a ten-day period. When the storm cleared, the temperature fell to 44 degrees below zero on the morning of December 21. On December 23 warm chinook winds began to blow, and the temperature reached 46 degrees above zero!

There were 1410 registered voters in 17 precincts in eastern Fergus County when Petroleum County was formed in 1924; in 1989, there were 315 registered voters and only one precinct. The Winnett Times in 1926 estimated the total population to be 3000 with 609 homes — 112 in the town, 497 in the rural areas. The last official census in 1980 indicated there were 655 people in the county, 207 of them in the town of Winnett.

Petroleum County began official operation with 13 post offices (see map) within its bounds. There had been almost twice that many throughout the early years. In 1989 there is but one post office and two rural stations (Cat Creek and Telgen).

The school district map shows the maximum number of school districts which have existed in the Petroleum County area. The earliest districts were very large, but gradually, as the land was settled and the population increased, the large districts were carved into a number of smaller districts. In 1925, twenty-four regular districts and ten joint districts existed. Today there is a single elementary district and a single high school district.

Although positive identification has been made of the location of over 110 schools which served the area, doubtless other schools operated for a short period of time for which records were not maintained. In 1925 the first county superintendent of schools reported 33 rural elementary schools, in addition to the elementary and high school in Winnett, planned to operated during the
journeyed to the upper Missouri past the mouth of the Musselshell River in 1833 before the days of photography. During the summer of 1843, John James Audubon camped for several months at Fort Union near the mouth of the Yellowstone River. He and members of his party made excursions up the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers collecting bird and animal specimens. Geologist Ferdinand V. Hayden made several trips along the upper Missouri in 1853 and 1859. He also made a trip with First Lieutenant John Mullins in 1860 across what would become southern Petroleum County. All of these men left written records of their observations. In later years, author James Willard Schultz often referred to the Musselshell drainage in his Blackfoot Indian stories.

Cattlemen and sheeppmen brought their herds and flocks to Central Montana in the early 1880s, and stocking of the area came quickly. Most of the cattle ranch headquarters were located in the foothills of the mountains with line camps and corrals located on the prairies. On the other hand, by the very nature of their business, sheeppmen established their headquarters in the immediate vicinity of their grazing and hay lands. They immediately set about acquiring land. For this reason there were more sheeppmen than cattlemen among Petroleum County’s first permanent settlers.

Granville Stuart very aptly described the rapid development of the range in *Pioneering in Montana*. He wrote, “It would be impossible to make persons not present on Montana cattle ranges realize the rapid changes that took place on those ranges in two years. In 1880 the country was practically uninhabited. One could travel for miles without seeing so much as a trapper’s bivouac. Thousands of buffalo darkened the rolling plains. In the whole Territory of Montana there were but 250,000 head of cattle, including dairy cattle and work oxen.

“In the fall of 1883, there was not one buffalo remaining on the range, and the antelope, elk and deer were indeed scarce. In 1880 no one had heard tell of a cowboy in this niche of the woods, and Charles Russell had made no pictures of them; but in the fall of 1883, there were 600,000 head of cattle on the range.”

In 1885 the *Mineral Argus* published in Maiden, Montana, listed the following members of the Flatwillow Roundup Association: Pioneer Cattle Company (Granville Stuart and associates), 25,000 head of cattle; Conrad Kohrs, 11,000; Henry Sieben, 4,000; Robert Coburn, 5000; Wisconsin and Montana Cattle Company, 500; McCauley and Snyder, 1000; Duncan Brothers, 300. In addition the Argus listed the following in the Musselshell River Roundup Association: Burnett Brothers, 300; New York Cattle Company, 6000; Montana Cattle Company, 20,000; and North West Cattle Company, 6000. This would indicate that by the mid-1880s there were about 80,000 head of cattle ranging between the Judith Mountains and the Musselshell River, basically the area now included in Petroleum County.

By 1885 the sheep industry was also well established in
Central Montana. According to research by Anna Zellick included in her thesis "History of Fergus County, Montana, 1879-1915." Fred Lawrence trailed 400 Merino sheep into Flatwillow Creek in 1877. Although separate statistics are not available for the portion of Central Montana which was to become Petroleum County, it was estimated that almost 40,000 sheep had been brought into the newly formed Fergus County in 1885. By 1887 Ms. Zellick reported that Fergus County was second highest in sheep numbers in the Montana Territory with 187,962 head. By 1897, her research indicates, there were 514,256 sheep in the county.

M. A. Leeson's *History of Montana*, published in 1885, listed the Montana Sheep Company (east of the Snowy Mountains) as having 15,000 head of mostly Merino sheep; Foreman on McDonald Creek with a herd of 7000 head; Lawrence on Flatwillow Creek with 1500. Although not mentioned by Leeson, local information confirms that Mons Teigen and W. J. Winnett were established on McDonald Creek by this date.

Large sheep and cattle operations dominated the early development of the area, but smaller landowners soon settled along the creeks and stage routes. The discovery of gold in the Judith Mountains in 1879, and the building of Fort Maginnis in 1880 on the flank of the same mountains, necessitated a trade route into that area. A natural route, from the head of navigation on the Yellowstone River at Junction City, cut across what would become the southern edge of Petroleum County.

**Land Acquisition Laws**

Settlers acquired land under a variety of public land laws, and confusion often exists as to the meaning of such terms as "pre-emption," "homestead," "commutation," "desert claim," to name a few. The following review of federal land acts is not intended to include the details of amendments and obscure clauses of the various acts or to cover those acts which had little or no importance to Petroleum County. Rather it is meant to aid the reader in understanding the various methods and conditions under which land was commonly acquired.

In the early 1800s a number of pre-emption acts were passed by the U.S. Congress in order to discourage land speculation by foreigners and wealthy land owners. "Pre-emption" was the preferential right of a settler — or squatter as he was often called — to buy the tract of land upon which he had settled at a modest price without competitive bidding. In other words, he had the first right to buy the land after it had been surveyed by the government. The first pre-emption acts set the minimum and maximum acres which could be purchased in this manner and the price to be paid per acre. In 1841 a pre-emption act was passed by Congress which provided for the sale of a maximum of 160 acres of previously surveyed land at a minimum price of $1.25 per acre without competitive bidding. Sale was open to any head of family regardless of age, to a widow or a single man over 21, and only to persons who did not hold 320 acres or more of other land in the same territory or state. Further, the settler must not quit other land he might hold in order to live on the proposed new land, if the new land was in the same state or territory.

Minor amendments and proposals were made to the pre-emption act in the next 20 years, but it was not until 1862 that a major change in land policy became law. On May 22, 1862, President Lincoln signed the first Homestead Act. It granted the right of a settler to claim 160 acres of surveyed land for only the cost of a filing fee, usually about $26.00. The settler in turn had to live on the land for five years and make certain improvements before title was secured. However, after six months the homesteader had the privilege of "commuting" his homestead rights for pre-emption rights. In other words, he could exchange his homestead claim for a pre-emption claim and purchase the homestead land outright under the pre-emption laws at the going rate — in most cases $1.25 per acre. (In 1891 the commuting clause was amended to read that homestead lands could be commuted "after 14 months."

An act passed in June 1862 extended the pre-emption laws to cover unsurveyed land. Nothing in the Homestead Act precluded a claimant from being an owner of pre-empted land when he filed his homestead claim. Therefore, it was possible to claim 160 acres of homestead land and 160 acres of pre-empted land.

The Desert Land Act of 1877 entitled a settler to purchase 640 acres of land, either surveyed or unsurveyed, for a down payment of $2.50 an acre, plus $1.00 at the time of making proof, on condition the land was irrigated within three years. The acreage provision was modified to 320 acres in 1890; in the next year, 1891, the General Land Revision Act specified that only 80 acres of the 320 acres need be irrigated. There was no requirement to live on the acreage, but the claimant had to be a resident of the state in which he filed the claim. This was to discourage outside land speculators from acquiring blocks of land. The Revised Act called for reclamation improvements of $3.00 per acre ($1.00 each year for three years) to be invested in the land.

The Timber and Stone Act passed in 1878 allowed the sale of 160 acres of timber land for a minimum of $2.50 an acre, if the land was "unoccupied, unimproved, surveyed, non-mineral land which was unfit for cultivation." Originally the act applied only to California, Oregon, Nevada and Washington, but it was later extended to include all other public domain. The timber or stone was to be used for personal, not commercial, use.

The Land Act of May 1878 provided that a pre-emption claim might be commuted into a homestead. In 1880 another act further amended the land laws to eliminate other differences between pre-emption and homestead claims and placed them on an equal footing, in essence eliminating the need for a pre-emption law. It allowed any land which might be entered under the pre-emption law
to be entered under the Homestead Act with the same privileges and guarantees. The 1891 act, which actually repealed the pre-emption act, amended the Homestead Act to allow commutation (or the privilege of buying outright) after 14 months of residency.

The land act which was to have the greatest impact upon eastern Montana was the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909, brought about by pressure on Congress from the arid west. The act provided for homesteads of 320 acres of non-irrigable land, one-fourth of which was to be cultivated. There was a five-year residency requirement to which western interests objected. They felt the homestead act as applied to the Midwest did not meet the needs of the arid west.

Consider the contrast between the early pioneer settler west of the Appalachian Mountains and the eastern Montana homesteader of 70 years later. Prime wooded land with water was readily available to the early pioneer. There was ample wood for heating, cooking and building snug cabins. In fact, clearing enough land to cultivate was the early settler's first major task. Unwittingly, the prairie homesteaders may have considered the lack of trees an advantage until faced with the hardships attendant to living without easy access to timber of any kind.

The lack of water compounded all of the hardships, particularly for the women. Even during the years when rainfall was adequate for crops, household water, for many, was a never-ending problem.

In 1912 the west won some concessions when a Three-Year Homestead Act was passed. It replaced the provisions of the old Homestead Act with 1) a residency provision of three years which allowed five months' leave of absence each year; 2) commutation after 14 months; 3) 1/16 of the land to be cultivated by the second year, 1/8 the third year. An extension clause allowed 12 extra months for completion of the cultivation if hardship was claimed.

In December 1916 the last major homestead act became law. It was the Stock Raising Homestead Act of 1916. The major provisions were 1) 640 acres maximum size; 2) land must be classified by the Secretary of Interior as being fit only for stock raising; 3) improvements to the land valued at $1.25 an acre to be made; 4) no commutation allowed; 5) coal and minerals reserved by the government; 6) water holes (as well as certain trails leading to water) reserved for public use. Classification by the Interior Department was slow, and entries were not actually processed until 1918. Many of the family stories in the text of this book confirm that by 1918 the exodus of homesteaders had already begun, and the concessions won by the western interests were not only too late, but were too little.

Settlers came to eastern Fergus County under all of the Homestead Acts mentioned. The big surge, however, came when the Enlarged Act of 1909 was passed and when the railroads began their grand promotion schemes. The Three-Year Homestead Act of 1912 gave added impetus to settlement. Access to eastern Montana was improving each year. The railroad arrived in Lewistown in 1903, and branch lines reached Grassrange in 1913, Roy in 1914. Melstone and Musselshell received train service in 1908. Nearly 2000 individuals received deeded land in what was to become Petroleum County under the various land acquisition acts.

A series of better-than-average years encouraged newcomers to believe they could overcome the odds. For many homesteaders, youth and enthusiasm were their biggest assets. Their stories were told over and over again in the text of this book. They danced on dirt floors in unfinished tar-paper shacks; they shared their joys and their sorrows, their books and their sugar. They built schools and established post offices.

The dry summer of 1918 and the early severe winter of 1919 brought the stark realization to a number of families, particularly those on the poorer land, that they could no longer continue. Some returned to their old homes, some found employment in the growing towns which served more fertile parts of Montana, and some looked to the west coast. Had it not been for the discovery of oil in Cat Creek in 1920, many more would undoubtedly have abandoned their land. Oil leases, newly created jobs, and the excitement which led them to believe there might be oil beneath their land bolstered the sagging spirits and pocketbooks of many.

Even though confronted with major setbacks, a sturdy core of determined individuals remained. Their pride and determination encouraged them to think conditions would be even better if a separate county could be formed in Eastern Fergus County.

The Struggle to Become a County

Twenty-seven new counties were formed in Montana after 1910. It was an era of "county busting" with all of eastern Montana scurrying to be included. The arguments in support of new counties were the same in every section — accessibility to a courthouse; use of local taxes to improve local roads and bridges; administration of schools closer to home; more effective law enforcement; enhanced representation in the legislature. Advocates maintained that the larger number of representatives in Helena, from eastern agricultural counties, would mitigate the power of the western mining interests which had so long dominated Montana politics.

Even before oil was discovered in Cat Creek, interests in eastern Fergus County were campaigning for a separate county. The increased valuation derived from oil production stimulated the confidence of the proponents of a new county.

In 1919 two legislative attempts were made to create a county in eastern Fergus County. The first, House Bill 57, would have created Cruse County from an area encompassing all of Fergus County east of the Judith Mountains. The day after HB 57 was killed on the floor of the House, Senate Bill 54 was introduced in the Senate. SB 54 would have created a small McKinley County east of the Judith...
Mountains, but one which included only the area south of Blood Creek. Although SB 54 passed the Senate, it was defeated by the House.

During the next legislative session, on February 3, 1921, Fergus County Representative J. H. Charters from Grassrange introduced House Bill 162 to create another Cruse County. The proposed boundaries were very similar to those of the first proposed Cruse County; Roy, Grassrange, Forestgrove, Becket, Winnett and Cat Creek were to be included in the new county. In fact, the Grass Range Review predicted in an editorial on February 3, 1921, that "the proposed new county . . . will be great enough in extent to permit an assessed valuation sufficient to make a good county at the start, and eventually to permit new counties being formed on the east and north." Although the Cruse County bill passed the House, it was killed in the Senate.

Fergus County Representative Homer Geis, a Winnett resident, did not support Mr. Charter's proposal. He believed a bill to create a smaller county would have a better chance of passage. He also may have been concerned about the location of a county seat in the proposed county, since Roy was a thriving little town and would perhaps bid for the location — or support Grassrange as the county seat! At any rate Representative Geis introduced House Bill 212 in the same session of the legislature. The bill would have created Edgerton County with its western boundary several townships east of the proposed Cruse County line. Roy, Forestgrove and Becket would no longer have been included. This measure did not get out of committee.

Undaunted by legislative defeat, proponents of a new county in eastern Fergus County took advantage of legislation which permitted county formation by petition and election.

In April 1921 Daniel McKay, known as Montana's "county splitter," was called in to organize a county formation campaign (See also McKay — Winnet). Specific conditions of the law had to be met: the assessed value of the new county must be $4,000,000; the parent county's remainder must be 1200 square miles with a valuation of $10,000,000; the new county line must be at least 15 miles from the old courthouse; and a petition for the new county must be signed by 58 percent of the voters in the proposed new area before the issue could be put on the ballot to be voted upon by the registered voters of the new district.

Dan McKay and a division committee agreed upon the proposed name of Petroleum County and upon the boundaries of the new county. The area would not include territory as far west as Grassrange. The committee rationalized that if Grassrange people wanted a county of their own, there was still adequate area in Fergus County from which they could carve another county.

Petitions for the creation of Petroleum County were circulated, but opponents, in turn, circulated withdrawal petitions. (A withdrawal petition requested removal of one's name from the original petition.) Not to be outdone, Dan McKay and his committee followed behind and circulated "withdrawal from withdrawal" petitions!

The process took longer than anticipated. McKay had predicted that the Fergus County commissioners could expect the petitions as a 1921 Christmas present, but it was not until April 18, 1922, that the petitions were filed. The commissioners did not hold a hearing on the petitions until May, and then they began a slow process of examining the validity of each signature. Only registered voters were eligible to sign the petitions.

According to a thesis written by Joanne Hassing ("The Creation of Petroleum County: A Case Study in 'County-Busting'"). "The crucial blow came when judges rejected about 130 signatures because they constituted withdrawals." They did not accept as valid the "withdrawal from withdrawal" petitions. In all, about 200 names were rejected, and on June 16, 1922, the Fergus County commissioners denied the petition for the creation of Petroleum County, because the petition did not contain the needed 58 percent of the electors of the proposed new county.

The Winnett Chamber of Commerce claimed injustice and irregularities and arranged to take the issue to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled that it had no original jurisdiction over the case and that the petitioners should have gone to district court. The determined petitioners took the case back to the local court, where Judge Rudolph Von Tobel ruled against them.

A new finance committee was formed by the boosters (Anthony Rasmussen, Elmer Eager, Dr. J. L. Alexander and Raymond Wiedman), and funds were collected to appeal the case to the Supreme Court. J. Otis Mud and Elmer Eager signed the bond for appeal costs for Archibald Faragher who had agreed to file the case. The case entered the Supreme Court on June 26, 1923, and a decision denying the appellants came on July 10, 1923. A headline in the Winnet Times three days later made it clear that the fight was not over: "Another Effort to be Made to Divide Fergus County by the Indignant Citizens of the East End."

Dan McKay was called back even before the Supreme Court rendered its decision. The two questions of boundary and name again surfaced. Finally, a boundary between ranges 23 and 24 in the south half of the proposed area and between ranges 22 and 23 in the north half was agreed upon, and the name Petroleum County was again chosen.

Circulation of new petitions began immediately, and on October 10, 1923, an election petition containing 71 percent of the registered voters in the proposed new county was presented to the county commissioners. The board set a hearing date of November 7, and everything seemed to be progressing smoothly. On November 6, however, an attorney for the opponents of division appeared and asked for a postponement of the hearing. The request was granted, and a second hearing was
scheduled on November 20. No vocal opposition surfaced at the hearing, and the petition was granted with an election scheduled for February 23, 1924. Several petitions for exclusions were considered, and the people of the Dory, Valentine and Nordquist precincts were granted exclusions. The proposed county still contained the necessary valuation to qualify as a new county.

On January 3, 1924, Charles J. Marshall, attorney for the opposition, instituted a suit to test the validity of the petition and asked for a temporary injunction. Marshall contended: 1) the valuation had been based on an incorrect date; 2) that oil royalties had been incorrectly valued; and 3) that hearing notices had not been published the required two weeks prior to the hearing date.

The third issue needs clarification. It was contended that the county clerk had not made an order designating the newspapers to publish the notice of the original hearing; that the notice appeared in the Fergus County Argus and the Winnett Times without published designation: and, further, that the notices did not qualify as having appeared for the required two weeks, since both papers were weekly publications and, although the notice appeared twice, the actual number of days before the hearing was 12 days for the Times and 13 days for the Argus.

Judge William L. Ford of White Sulphur Springs heard the case. To the dismay of the proponents of division, two representatives of Mid Northern Oil Company unexpectedly appeared to fight the creation move. Proponents of the new county had been led to believe that the oil companies were not going to become involved in the issue but were willing to let the voters rule. After a bitter public and private exchange regarding this corporate interference, the case proceeded. Judge Ford sustained the contentions of the anti-divisionists and ordered the temporary injunction to be made permanent. The Fergus County commissioners stated they would not take the case to the Supreme Court.

The Winnett Times fumed: "The citizens of the proposed Petroleum County will fight on and on until Petroleum County is a reality and in this fight ask no quarter nor offer any." And fight they did. Again, funds were raised to appeal the case. and slogans and editorials appeared regularly in the newspaper: "Gophers Digging for Facts about Fergus County," "Proponents of Petroleum County Know no Defeat," "Fergus County Leads Montana in Orneryness and Indebtedness."

In spite of the determined fight by the divisionists, Chief Justice L. L. Callaway delivered an opinion which upheld the district court. No mention was made of the critical issue of the value of oil royalties, but rather the decision was based upon the technicality of the dates of publication of the hearing. Justice Callaway ruled that publication had to have been made a full 14 days before the hearing, even if it involved publication for three weeks in the weekly newspapers.

Ms. Hassing summarized the situation very well when she wrote: "Thus, the second attempt to create Petroleum County by petition and election came to an end in the Supreme Court, as had the first. The unsuccessful endeavors to create a county from eastern Fergus County now included four legislative attempts, two petition and election movements, two district court cases and two Supreme Court appeals. Little had been attained. One could expect perhaps that the divisionists would consider the effort futile after such a history of failure. Such was not the case."

"That the divisionists intended yet to continue their fight was at once apparent. Crying that 'neither the courts, the Lewistown politicians nor the Standard Oil Company can obliterates the Petroleum County issue,' the proponents of a new county prepared still a third movement, . . . indeed, the circulation of petitions had already begun before the case entered the Supreme Court in May 1924. Within a week, over 65 percent of the voters of eastern Fergus County signed the third petition."

The area to be encompassed in the new request was altered to include more territory to the north than had been in the former petition after exclusions were allowed. Only an exclusion of 2% townships, including the Valentine Post Office, was granted in this final drive. A petition by Welington-Ashley was denied. Opposition from the Mid Northern Oil interests did not develop, and the commissioners accepted the petition as valid and set the general election date of November 4, 1924, as the date for the issue to be placed on the ballot.

Voters in 17 precincts were eligible to vote — Ashley, Blakeslee, Dovetail, Flatwillow, Frantz (Cat Creek), Hoyle, Kelley, Leslie, Myers (Berville), Nordquist (Ross), Plainview (believed to have been near Blakeslee), Teigen, South Valentine, Weede, Weston (Upper Musselshell), North Winnett and South Winnett. The final vote was 891 for and 235 against creation of Petroleum County. Only the Myers, Teigen and Nordquist precincts failed to support the new county. Winnett received 80 percent of the vote for county seat.


One parting frustration was to emerge before the legal status of Petroleum County was secure. A bill relating to changing the boundaries of Fergus County and Judith Basin County was passed in the 1925 legislature.
Unaware of the details of the measure, no one from Petroleum County protested its passage. As Ms. Hassing observed in her thesis, "The circumstances suggest confusion and preoccupation with another problem, rather than conspiracy." Regardless of intent, the law abolished Petroleum County and vacated the offices which had just been filled. Again it was necessary to request a Supreme Court decision. The court declared a section of the act to be invalid and dismissed the complaint. At long last, Petroleum County was an uncontested political entity.

The realities of "running their own business" quickly descended upon the newly elected county officials. An agreement was reached with Elmer Eager to rent his Mercantile Company store building as a temporary courthouse, and a contract was let to buy new furniture. The commissioners were immediately presented with a taxpayer petition stating that second-hand furniture should be purchased instead of new. Remodeling expenses amounted to $1526, and a janitor had to be hired. All records pertaining to the new county had to be transferred and/or transcribed from Fergus County records. Apportionment of Fergus County's assesses and debts had to be agreed upon. Requests for road and bridge work were received. One of the strongest advocates of county division, Mr. Doherty, editor of the Winneti Times, objected when the commissioners decided to 'post' rather than 'print' the proceedings of commissioner meetings.

Oil production was no longer growing by leaps and bounds, and the boundaries of the oil field had not expanded. Population was already declining in the new county, and homesteaders were abandoning their property. Weather extremes were taking their toll. Total precipitation for 1928 in parts of the county was 6.5 inches — only 12 nights were above zero degrees in January of 1929 — and the summer of that year was again very dry.

The Winneti Times reported in January 1930 that for three miles outside of the town limits the snow was three feet deep on the level. Several volunteers were building a big snowplow in hopes of opening school routes and other main roads. The road from Winneti to the water well north of town had been so blocked with snow that the water truck was unable to get through. This left the half of the town not served by the city water system without water. There was a severe shortage of livestock feed as well.

By contrast, in January 1931, dust storms were reported in the county. The total precipitation for 1931 in most parts of the county was under six inches. Legal notices by the county began to appear in the Winneti Times announcing foreclosure for delinquent taxes. The Farmers and Merchants Bank closed its doors in January 1930.

**Drought and Depression**

Drought and depression were not unique to Petroleum County. Indeed, the entire nation was suffering its worst economic disaster. Franklin Roosevelt was elected president in 1932, and he undertook a massive relief program. By February 16, 1934, twenty-four government "alphabet" programs were listed in the Winneti Times. The new government departments ranged from the well-known FERA (Federal Emergency Relief Administration) to the obscure CSB (Central Statistical Board). (According to a news account, the CSB was "an inter-departmental group which neither gathers nor compiles statistics, but gives advice with reference to fields that should be covered and technical systems to be employed in gathering and compilation of the data." Bureaucratic jargon obviously is not new!)

If a program failed or was declared unconstitutional, seemingly three new programs sprouted from the ashes. T. C. Spaulding, Director of Montana State Relief and the FERA in Montana, was quoted in the Winneti Times (4-20-34) as saying, "... the original RFC (Reconstruction Finance Corporation), the FERA and particularly the CWA (Civil Works Administration) were emergencies, wartime (like) measures, to meet a critical situation. Those things have been changed now (in 1934) and a new plan has been formulated by the Federal Government in meeting a nation-wide planning program for the rehabilitation of our citizenry and the rehabilitation of our natural resources."

Mr. Spaulding did not realize how his remarks might be construed in later years when he continued, "Herr Hitler's Nazi movement to nationalize Germany; Mussolini's reconstruction of Italy; The Socialist Soviet Republic's five-year plan for the advancement of Russia — momentous ideas, yes, but they're just a drop in the bucket compared to President Roosevelt's new long-time program for the rehabilitation and advancement of the United States."

Petroleum County was deeply involved in some of the state-administered federal programs. Until the Civil Works Administration closed in 1934, it employed a number of local men in public work projects — graveling county roads, installing indoor lavatories and a sewer system in the school, building an airport and constructing reservoirs. Direct relief in the form of money and commodities was available to many.

The Federal Emergency Relief Administration took over all relief activities of the CWA in April 1934. New emphasis was placed on employment of all able-bodied individuals who applied for aid. The FERA was reported to be the largest single employer in Montana in June 1934, employing 10,000 men and providing direct relief to many more. FERA work programs were eventually replaced by WPA (Works Progress Administration) projects. Local WPA projects included tennis courts in Winneti, a county jail, city street improvement, prefabricated outdoor toilets, and grasshopper and prairie dog eradication.

The CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) was designed to employ young men ages 18 to 25 years old in conservation oriented programs. The boys were provided board
and room in army-type camps and received a base wage of $30.00 per month. Not only did a number of young men from Petroleum County join the CCC and go to camps throughout Montana, but a CCC camp was located in the county. In November 1935, a $30,000 camp to house 200 boys was completed just east of the town of Winnett. The camp consisted of two barracks equipped with showers, wash rooms and lavatories; an officers' and technicians' building; an infirmary; a recreation hall; a mess hall and a garage. (See pictures in Town of Winnett Introduction.)

The men from the Winnett cantonment, in cooperation with the Montana State Water Conservation Board, completed two major projects in Petroleum County. They built a new intake ditch to War House Butte Reservoir and did extensive repair work to the dam itself; they built Yellow Water Reservoir. In addition, they did contouring and border diking on approved private land projects.

The men from the Winnett camp were assigned to Lewistown and Winifred in September 1938, and in December 1938 fifty CCC boys from Jordan and Lewistown came to Winnett to dismantle the buildings. The salvaged materials were trucked to other CCC camps at Winifred, Jordan, Lewistown and Bozeman.

The NYA (National Youth Administration), meanwhile, provided part-time jobs for eligible young men and women who were still in school. Applicants had to be 16 years old and prove economic need to qualify for the program. If accepted, satisfactory performance on the job was required, as well as satisfactory academic work in at least ¾ of their classwork. Petroleum County also participated in this program.

### Land Reclamation

President Roosevelt's administration, however, was not only concerned with depression relief; it was concerned about land conservation. In 1934 a major shift in federal land policy became evident. Prior to the 1930s, the government had opened the public domain to settlement with the title of the land going into private hands. This was to come to an end in the 1930s, and emphasis was to be placed upon reclamation.

Montana was a forerunner in recognizing the need to return submarginal land to grazing. The first non-profit cooperative grazing association established in the United States was the Mizpah-Pumpkin Creek Association in Custer County, Montana. A special act of Congress in 1928 permitted its organization and utilization of federal lands. As an outgrowth of this experimental project, the first Montana Grazing District laws were enacted in 1933. By December 1934 eight grazing districts had been set up in Petroleum County. The success of the Custer County experiment lent support to the passage of the federal Taylor Grazing Act in 1934.

Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes was convinced that 25 million acres of submarginal land should be retired from farming. A massive federal land classification program was promoted, and vast irrigation projects were planned. The administration hoped to retire five acres of submarginal land for every new acre of irrigated land put into production, giving submarginal land owners first chance to be resettled onto the irrigation projects. The submarginal lands acquired by the federal government (which became known as LU or land utilization lands), the public domain (PD lands which had never been homesteaded), and the vast areas of lands which had reverted to the counties because of tax delinquency were to be rehabilitated and leased to organized grazing districts. The Taylor Grazing Act and the Resettlement Administration were designed to accomplish these goals.

The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 provided for the segregation of 80,000,000 acres of public grasslands, to be administered by the Department of Interior. The department had broad powers to develop water, to stop soil erosion, to organize grazing districts and to issue grazing permits.

The first Farm Resettlement program in the United States was begun in Blaine, Phillips, and Valley counties in 1934. It was called the Milk River Northern Montana Land Utilization Project. Another resettlement program, commonly referred to as the Fairfield Bench Project, was to become important to a number of Petroleum County homesteaders who sold their land to the federal government and resold to those near Fairfield.

On October 5, 1934, the Winnett Times printed a letter from the office of the Musselshell Land Repurchasing Project, a federal district office, to all owners of land in Golden Valley, Wheatland and Petroleum counties. It stated, "This project is an experimental project in land repurchase. If farmers and landowners desire to sell their land at a reasonable figure and allow the land to return to its proper use, this is an opportunity to do so. This program is optional and you are not being forced into it, but if you wish to sell your land, list it for sale at once in order that we may make as many appraisals this fall as possible."

The value of grazing land was set from fifty cents to two dollars per acre, depending upon its classification. Improvements such as reservoirs and buildings were given considerations. The Rural Rehabilitation Division of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration assisted the seller in locating and financing a new farm.

In May 1935 eighteen government appraisers were working in Petroleum County classifying land. Meanwhile the FERA, employing WPA workers, had already begun construction of fences, stock reservoirs and other public works on public lands in the county. It was announced in November 1935 that the Resettlement Administration and the WPA had reached agreement on rural rehabilitation programs. Families not accepted for rehabilitation would continue to be cared for by other state and federal agencies. Montana received $1,579,644 for land purchases. In December of the same year, $46,395 was
made available for loans and grants to rehabilitated individuals.

The Winnet Times (4-2-37) headlined an article "Removal makes splendid progress!" According to the report, 450 rural relief cases in Musselshell and Petroleum counties were working on land rehabilitation development programs. Ninety dams had been completed in Petroleum County and 12 were under construction. Seeding of crested wheat was beginning, fences and cattle guards had been built, springs were cleaned and developed and prairie dog eradication was underway. Old buildings and fences were wrecked and salvaged. A number of references to "working on the resettlement" will be found in the text of family stories. Arrangements were made to lease all repurchased land to the local grazing districts. By 1937, 241,000 acres had been purchased by the federal government in Musselshell and Petroleum counties at a cost of $461,000.

Meanwhile federal measures were taken to aid the grain farmer and the stockman who stayed on his land. The "Triple A" (AAA — Agricultural Adjustment Administration), the CCC (Commodity Credit Corporation) and FCA (Federal Credit Administration) were initiated in 1933.

The AAA sponsored a production curtailment program designed to reduce both grain and livestock surpluses. During the summer of 1934, it was estimated that the federal government might purchase, nation wide, as many as 7,000,000 head of cattle for slaughter. First priority was given to cattle in drought-designated areas such as Petroleum County. A cattle appraisal and buying office was opened in Winnett in early September 1935. Prices paid for cattle ranged from $12 to $20 per head for two-year olds and older, $10 to $15 for yearlings, $4 to $8 for calves. If it was determined that the stock were not fit for human consumption, the animals were killed by the owner and the hide presented to the proper authorities before payment could be received. Sellers had to qualify for the program by proving they did not have adequate feed to winter the livestock. In 1934, 1,631 head of cattle were purchased by the federal government in Petroleum County with only a few head condemned.

The purchase of sheep was a different matter. In some areas in Montana as high as 92 percent of the sheep were condemned and killed. Nearly 11,000 sheep were purchased in Petroleum County at $2 per head; about 5000 were condemned. Sheep skinners were in great demand, and the FERA employed crews of men to carry out the task. Where large flocks of sheep were condemned, a procedure known as "ballooning" was employed to speed up the skinning process. A jet of compressed air was forced between the flesh and the skin of the sheep. It quickly loosened the hide, and the skinner only had to remove the pelts from the animals' extremities. The pelts were shipped to Miles City where a tanning factory was set up to process them.

Participation in a corn-hog surplus reduction program was also carried out in Petroleum County. Figures are not available concerning the extent of the program, although the Winnet Times reported that recipients in Petroleum County received $801.15 for corn and $1212 for hogs under the program during October 1934.

Under the AAA, an acreage reduction program combined with a guaranteed "parity" price was initiated for grain commodities. Parity was a price computed on a base period (1910-1914 in most cases) plus cost of production factors. For those who chose to participate in the program, a guaranteed price and/or loan was paid by the federal government for various grains. The Federal Credit Association and PCA (Production Credit Association) made loans available with reasonable interest rates for seed, fertilizer and operating costs. The SCS (Soil Conservation Service) was established in 1935 to aid and encourage soil conservation practices on privately owned lands. FERA and Resettlement conservation programs were limited to government owned or acquired lands.) State Soil Conservation districts were established. With various changes and modifications, many of the same programs existed for farmers in 1989. Since the 1930s, numerous federal programs have encouraged crop reduction, and marginal lands are periodically taken out of production under AAA-type federally sponsored programs. The Soil Bank was a classic example in 1956, and the current CRP (Crop Reduction Programs), initiated in 1985, repeats the same long-term goals.

As the 1930s wore on, in spite of all the disaster relief programs, more and more people abandoned their land. Three and four page sections of the Winnet Times were devoted to listings of tax delinquent property. In May 1939, the newspaper listed Petroleum County as owning 138,910 acres of land, the federal government 375,000 acres. Of the federal lands, 135,000 acres were tax deed lands which had been bought from the county or taken back from private individuals under various rehabilitation programs. The balance of the federal land had never been homesteaded, the majority of the federal land was leased by local grazing districts.

Ownership of such a high percentage of land by the county and the federal government obviously meant a reduction in local property tax collections in spite of the fact that the federal Bankhead-Jones Act called for payment to the counties of 25 percent of the net revenues received from federal lands. Faced with this reduction in tax collections and other economic problems of the period, Petroleum County found itself in serious financial trouble. In 1937 the commissioners had sold 43,521 acres of tax-deed land to the federal government for $52,226, but this represented a one-time sale, and when the money was spent, no more could be anticipated from that source. The assessed value of property in Petroleum County declined from $4,875,000 in 1926 to $2,398,600 in 1942. Montana law in 1942 limited to 16 mills the tax which could be levied for county purposes — $12,028 in Petroleum County's case. Expenditures were running about $22,000 per year.
County Manager Plan Emerges

The county commissioners tried to control expenditures by consolidating some of the elected offices, but this did not prove to be entirely satisfactory. Dr. R. R. Renne and Dr. Merrill Burlingame from Montana State College were consulted. No other county had ever taken advantage of a 1931 Montana law which allowed counties to adopt a managerial form of government. Based upon the law and the recommendations of Dr. Renne and Dr. Burlingame, the county commissioners took the necessary steps to set up Montana’s first county manager form of government.

The plan was approved by voters in July 1942 by a vote of 277 for and 135 against. Under the plan the manager would be the chief executive officer of the county. The Board of Commissioners would act as a policy making body, and the manager would be directly responsible to the board. Roy Martin of Lewistown, Montana, was hired as Petroleum County’s first county manager in December 1942. Instead of 13 elected county officials, five individuals were appointed to carry out the necessary duties of running the county. Within five years, Petroleum County had paid off its bonded indebtedness and retired its outstanding warrants.

Since that time, other consolidation measures have proved to be economical. Petroleum County is the only county in the state which has but one elementary and one high school district. It also has the only county-wide combined elementary-high school-community library.

In spite of the successful measures adopted to effect efficiency in local government, ominous clouds are on the horizon for those who believe there is a place for Petroleum County in the great state of Montana. Elsewhere in the state there are those who believe efficiency can only be accomplished by consolidating Montana’s 56 counties into 16 or 18 counties. It was hard to believe Petroleum County’s representation in the legislature was so easily stripped away by reapportionment in 1965. Now, with even less voice in the affairs of state, the status of the county itself may be in jeopardy.

Montana State Centennial 1989

Between 750 and 800 alumni, including guests, attended the Winnett High School all-class reunion on July 15 and 16, 1989. A feature of the occasion was a Centennial Parade on Main Street of Winnett. Prize-winning entrants were awarded Montana Centennial medallions. Above: Carroll Manuel and his six-horse hitch. Below left: Honky-tonk music in a saloon setting. Below right: Another distinctive feature of the reunion was a Centennial exhibition in the D and E (Winkes Brothers Store, 1921) building.
Several local people participated in the Great Montana Centennial Cattle Drive between Roundup and Billings beginning Labor Day weekend. Above: Horse-drawn wagons wending their way through the Bull Mountains. Below left: "Empty Saddles on the Old Corral" and a beautiful herd of horses. Below right: The Yellow Circle of wagons from Petroleum and Fergus counties.

Many folk attended the official State Centennial Celebration on November 8, 1989, in Helena, via television. In Winnett, residents were thrilled to hear the old school bell as it respectfully rang at the exact time the bells were ringing in Helena. Left: Bernice and Rudy Glatz, Sandy and Dana Glatz, Dee and Jim Johnke, and Jim and Diana Brady attended the Centennial Ball in the State Capitol. Right: Also attending the ball were Lee and Marcia Iverson.