

"The sky can't be any bigger out there than it is here at home," my sister informed me when I told her Montana was called Big Sky Country.

Fat lot she knows. Tall buildings don't litter the sky here in western Montana like they do back east--where she and I were born and where she still lives.

All you see when you look around this part of Montana are mountains, foothills, and endless skies. Usually the skies are blue. Sometimes, however, in the evening, just before sunset, an invisible hand paints them orangey-pink and allows the last of the sun's rays to shoot them through with gold. Other times, they're just soft, wispy streaks of grey, piled on top of each other like a layer of quilts.

Do you believe in love at first sight? I never did until I drove south of Missoula into the Bitterroot and saw acres and acres of hayfields. Have you ever stood in a hayfield? Right up close to one of those rolls of hay that litter the field after a harvest? They're huge. Taller than me, and wider than I am tall. They smell earthy and fresh, better even than newly mown grass. The best view is when you stand close to them and stare up: shades of green and gold against a backdrop of big, blue, cloudless summer sky. I took at least several dozen pictures of hay fields that day and not a single person came racing across their hayfield, hollering at me for trespassing, insisting that I hop back through the fence. I'll admit a few people slowed their cars as they passed by but, when they saw my camera and rental car, they understood, smiling and waving as they sped on their way.

The cattle and horses probably thought I was weird, but since they can't talk and not a one of them attempted to chase me off, I simply snapped a couple dozen more photos.

That first visit to Montana was during the last week of August, which is probably the most beautiful time of year. After my trek into the Bitterroot, I visited Great Falls,

traveling along Highway 200, which meanders beside the Blackfoot River part of the way. Ever cautious about the wildlife that abounds along riverbeds, and everywhere else in Montana, I was super-aware each time I stopped to take photos: the eyes in the back of my mother's head were alert. I was viewing some of the spectacular river photos I'd just snapped with my digital camera, standing beside my rental car in a rest area, when a great crashing suddenly sounded in the wooded area to my right. Torn between the desire to instantly become a wildlife photographer and the very real fear of the infamous grizzly bears and mountain lions I'd heard stories about, I compromised and jogged around to the side of the Dodge farthest from the forest. I was hoping for at least a deer, maybe even an elk or a moose but, before I could lift the camera to my eye, a red angus with a white face burst through the undergrowth.

I laughed out loud. And laughed even harder when the sound of hooves on pavement heralded half a dozen of her cronies as they approached on an asphalt road that led uphill to the rest area. Two other cows were actually standing next to the metal guard rail separating them from the highway. So much for wildlife.

When I returned to Missoula, I headed north for a job interview in Whitefish. The Mission Mountains, white-tipped even in August, stood majestic and awesome against the big, blue Montana sky. They stole my breath then and continue to do so every time I drive through St. Ignatius.

I retract my statement that August is the most beautiful time in western Montana. You'd think that winter, with all its white snow, would appear stark and colorless. But it isn't. In fact, there are more shades of green in the Rocky Mountains during wintertime than you'd believe possible. The skies are bluer during wintertime and there's nothing more striking than the sparkling panorama of sunlight reflecting off the snow and ice clinging to the needles of the pines and firs.

The inhabitants of western Montana are as beautiful as the scenery – and more friendly than their livestock. They're warm and welcoming and vastly generous, in spite of the conflict they live with. The conflict of both wanting to share their bounty with the rest of the world and wanting to hug the secret of this last best place tight to their chests.

From the very first day of my very first visit, I encountered nothing but helpful, friendly people. When I asked for directions to Great Falls, I was given precise information, complete with street names and landmarks. Along with a suggestion that if I didn't mind spending an extra half hour, the drive along Highway 200 was much more scenic than the route I'd originally planned. That extra thirty minutes was well worth the breathtaking landscape. When I inquired about real estate, the broker drove me completely around the city of Missoula, up to Arlee, out to Nine Mile, and back via Highway 10. Then, he left me with an abundance of resources: street maps, county maps, state maps, driving maps, and a handful of local magazines, newspapers, and other publications. When I acted like a typical tourist, I saw my wonder and burgeoning love for this part of the country mirrored in the eyes of every person who shared their time and experiences with me.

Western Montana is the place where I should have been born, had my parents been more discerning and a bit less concerned about things that have little meaning to me. The moment my eyes saw those foggy hay fields in Florence early one Saturday morning, I was a goner.

About two years after I moved to Montana, I was chatting with a business acquaintance, marveling that someone had recently told me she didn't feel comfortable in Missoula, that she felt like a stranger. I told Penny I couldn't understand the

woman's experience and didn't believe it: no one had ever treated me like a stranger in the two years I'd been living here.

Penny surprised me by saying, "That's because you're not a stranger."

And how could I be? I'm home.