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AN ANTHOLOGY OF INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES

ON THE MEANING OF "SENSE OF PLACE" IN A MODERN-DAY WORLD

by

Carly A. Mayberry

B.S. University of Utah, 1995

presented in fulfillment of the requirements

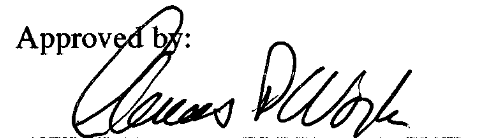
for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

December 2003

Approved by:



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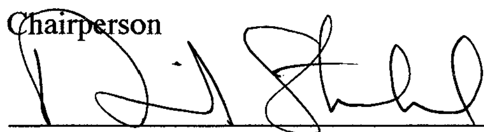

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Sense of place.

One could say it's a concept as vast and varied as the landscape of the West itself, where many came searching for a place to call their own.

For some, it may be the memory of the settings where various childhood events took place.

To others it's the place that holds the deepest connection or a sacred or holy place – one so esteemed that all that's desired is to keep it untouched.

And still to others, sense of place is simply the feeling of holding value in and being part of a community of people.

The writer Wendell Berry has been quoted as saying: If you don't know where you are you don't know who you are.

Wallace Stegner writes in his essay *The Sense of Place:*

> ... if every American is several people, and one of them is or would like to be a placed person, another is the opposite, the displaced person, cousin not to Thoreau but to Daniel Boone, dreamer not of Walden Ponds but of far horizons, traveler not in Concord but in wild unsettled places, explorer not inward but outward.
>
> Adventurous, restless, seeking, asocial or antisocial, the displaced American persists by the million long after the frontier has vanished. He exists to some extent in all of us, the inevitable by-product of our history: the New World transient. Acquainted with many places, he is rooted in none.

Environmental writer Barry Lopez writes in his essay *The American Geographies,*

"As Americans, we profess a sincere and fierce love for the American landscape, for our rolling prairies, free flowing rivers and 'purple mountains majesty'; but it is hard to imagine actually where this particular landscape is."

It was the phrase "Go West young man" that had not only the early pioneers but men and women in later generations in America doing just that for the last 150 years. People journeyed to a new land with the vision of a better life. They came to the West for the place that it was – a land that was safer, cleaner and less crowded with open space, flowing rivers and mountains.

But after 150 years of fencing, damming, sub-dividing and just plain changing the West to suit the needs of man, some feel it's time for a new revolution, one that doesn't involve industry or technology.

Many people feel it's time we settle in and become natives or as Wallace Stegner has said, "it's probably time we looked around us instead of looking ahead."

University of Montana history professor Dan Flores writes extensively about viewing place, particularly the West in terms of the land and ecosystems.

"When someone asks 'Why is this particular city or town here?' or comments there is no particular reason for it being in the spot it's in, I think of this as a classic reaction of a modern person not recognizing the place they inhabit is actually there for a compelling reason – because it commanded a transportation nexus, or a river cut through

a plateau or it's the only place for hundreds of miles in any direction," says Flores. "And yet 100 years later that kind of knowledge is not even current among people who were born and raised in a place."

This lack of awareness is in great contrast to the Native Americans, the first inhabitants of many areas of the West, who Flores says have experienced the greatest change in regards to connection to the land and to place.

"Look at the nature of the transient lives Americans lead today, with many of us living in more than six different places in the course of a lifetime," he said. "This is in huge contrast to the many native groups that had 10 to 15 generations of people stay in the same place. There was a lot more familiarity with the natural processes of their local area and there wasn't a quantum difference between humans and other living creatures."

Judy Blunt knows all about the connection of one's sense of place being drawn from the land. As a young woman, the author and native Montanan left the remote ranch of her upbringing, the only physical place she'd ever known, to find her own identity and to discover that one's "sense of place" has many meanings.

Her connection was not unlike another famous Montanan, Norman Maclean, whose sense of place developed into an appreciation for more than one place. Maclean had attachments to his childhood home of Montana as well as the city of Chicago, where he pursued the life of an intellectual as an adult.

John W. Klocek, Ph.D., a professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Montana, says that "sense of place" exists for each person individually based on what they're familiar with but that it can change.

"From personality research, we know that we can really begin to like wherever we are," Klocek said, pointing out that an affinity can exist for a place even if it isn't home.

"It exists even if you don't grow up in Chicago but love to go to the city," he said. "It doesn't have to be green space."

And it isn't green space, but the admiration of old buildings and the respect for the history of community and neighborhood that they are a part of that encompasses historian Allan Mathews' sense of place.

Mathews sees an understanding of place intricately tied to the history and design of structures and the stories of the people that inhabited them. He says it's time to let go of the frontiersman mentality that something better waits around the bend.

"It's a frontier thing ... the notion that there will always be a new place. But even 100 years of history is important," says Mathews.

Fellow historic preservationist, acquaintance of Mathews' and native New Yorker Ned Kaufman said that for him it's the cityscape that is laminated with places that provide his particular sense of belonging and place.

"I walk through places and all the different episodes from a year ago and a month ago come to mind," Kaufman said about wandering the streets of New York City.

"These places are a tapestry of your own experiences, of autobiographical stories, and it's not only that we project our own stories on to places but that places project them back to us."

On a smaller and more personal level, Kaufman compares the boroughs of New York to the neighborhoods of other cities as how people identify themselves locally and as part of community.

But despite the more recent movement towards preservation, seven-term Democratic congressman Pat Williams says America has always needed a new frontier.

"Americans need to move West. They need to know there's another hill just beyond this one," he said. "Early fur traders with the Hudson Bay St. Louis Company found their way to the West and then came the Lewis and Clark expedition. Gold followed and then silver and copper."

But he acknowledges that with so many on the same migratory quest an immense pressure has been placed upon the land, cities and communities creating new issues.

Williams, who grew up in Butte during the tail end of its mining heyday, still speaks to the environmental issues and legislation that he says have helped define "place." He points to the irony behind his hometown's existence based solely on the mining influence, and the fact that it now serves as the "largest Superfund site in America" and a template for the problems of industry in America.

"I can remember the bustle of business, the profit, the eagerness, the sense of hustle in Butte in the 1940s, '50s and to some degree '60s," he said. "Downstream, the Clark Fork River was an open sewer. You didn't want to fish because there weren't any fish, or the fish could be poison if you ate them. You didn't sit on the banks because much of it was riprapped with the old rusting abandoned bodies of automobiles.

"There were the high times ...the champagne flowed ... now the bill has come, the confetti has fallen, the party is over and somebody has to pay the waiters. In Butte, that takes the form of cleanup," he said.

Williams also confirms the story of people like Judy Blunt who left a life living close to the land for the opportunities found in the city.

"Every year, there are fewer small farmers on the land in eastern Montana and throughout the West than there were the previous year," said Williams. "From a commercial standpoint, we live on the land differently and will for many years to come."

Daniel Kemmis, Director of the Center for the Rocky Mountain West, has written extensively about place and the West.

While he acknowledges the timeless story of those searching for not only a sense of place but also an existence fruitful with prosperity and advancement, like Mathews, he thinks there needs to be a greater emphasis on the importance that a sense of community plays in our attachment to place.

"There's a myth of the West," Kemmis said, " ... the rugged individualist, the lone cowboy making his way without relying on anyone. The West attracted these people but the good has been accomplished by people working together."

And while many people besides Flores attribute our lack of belonging to a superficial sense of place, others, including he, feel it's also related to an increasingly complex society.

"We live in such a complex society, we're just being assaulted by sensory input all the time," Flores said. "The only way to filter it out is to ignore it."

Author Debra Earling, who has written in depth about her Salish Kootenai heritage, says that it's not only Indian people who feel a loss of connection to the land and a lessening sense of place in a modern world.

"It's amazing to me that technology, the mechanism we've chosen to sustain our way of life is so distracting," Earling said. "There's no place for peace."

Williams points to a movement he sees as driven from the need for peace from that technology-driven, fast-paced society.

Specifically, he cites places like Montana that have gone through a recent and significant transition – particularly an economic one – that is driven by the geography of the place.

"Many people still come to Montana but they no longer come to saw down the trees or dig into the mountain sides," he said. "They come to ski down the mountain sides and walk through the trees."

"In these more open spaces, the lifestyle and the living against the land is very different. You not only see the weather coming, but somehow your body begins to associate with nature.

"But I had a friend from the Bronx who came to the West and quickly had to move away. He couldn't stand the openness," Williams said. "So sense of place makes a great difference with regard to the way we internalize nature and internalize our surroundings."

And while Williams' New York friend had trouble with the open land of the West, Kaufman had dreams of coming West … literally.

"I had a dream and in it I found myself in a place with round, yellowish hills," Kaufman said. "And in the dream this is where I knew I needed to be.

"Two years later I found myself in Pocatello, Idaho, and there I was amongst those hills," he said.

"Whose to say if I had known at the time of the dream that was the place," Kaufman said. "When I look at this now, maybe it was the place meant for me or maybe it wasn't. It only brings to light a new question: Is there a certain right place for everyone?"

John Ford, the early film producer, specialized in the western genre making many films about "place." Once he was asked if he showed the West the way it was in his movies and he replied: "Hell no, I showed it the way it should have been."

Williams says that ultimately this is the essence of the concept "place."

"I don't believe there's a definition for the West," says Williams. "I believe there are thousands – maybe hundreds of thousands of definitions for the West."

Maybe that's the point ... that a person's sense of place is whatever they think it is or make it to be.

But perhaps a more relevant point for the times we live in is that like the pioneers who stopped their wagon trains and the Indians who listened to the land, maybe it's time we too stop, look around, and become natives of our present-day place.

In the following profiles the lives of four people who have not only acknowledged their own pervasive sense of place from their lives spent in the West, but honored it while working towards attaining a sense of place in the present, will be examined.

First, Dan Flores, an environmental historian who strives to make sense of his own spot on the ground by respecting the boundaries of nature, will be focused on.

Flores thinks holistically about place by not only studying the history behind the land, but by actively working to preserve and restore it. He rejects the notion that sense of place is necessarily constructed for us by a modern and technologically advanced society.

In contrast, Allan Mathews is also a historian but finds as well as shares an urban perspective on sense of place through his knowledge of old buildings.

From explanations regarding craftsmanship to storytelling of the lives of those who inhabited them and the changing landscape of neighborhoods, Mathews' life is one which has examined sense of place on a social level and what that means to the concept of community.

Next, the legendary Norman Maclean, who formed a strong attachment to two separate locations, will be examined. Maclean successfully incorporated a dual sense of place, living a life of intellectualism in the city of Chicago, while honoring Montana, the place of his roots as the foundation and grounding reference point for everything that happened in his life.

Then there's Judy Blunt, whose sense of place began as something to rebel against, but who like Maclean, would realize the relevance of two different places, each different, but completely important to the soul.

Blunt would find that the physical landscape of her childhood would become an internal one – that the land owned her – and regardless of where she was she could never

quite separate herself from the remote place where on more than one occasion she saw the weather coming.

"It's about sinking into a person's local place and learning it."

When Dan Flores gives directions to his home in the Sapphire Mountains, street names are scarcely mentioned.

"Head off to the east, cross the Bitterroot River and head to the south ... go to where the road forks, then left until it winds to a knapweed-covered plain where the power lines cross the hill," he instructs.

Of course, the power lines don't come to Flores' adobe-style home. Neither do phone lines. But if you walk down the hill he has restored to native grasses, you will come upon a sweat lodge and teepee, also built by Flores.

A flag greets the visitor upon arriving at his 25-acre spread. On it is a large red circle against a background of yellow.

Flores explains the symbol represents the sun shining against a yellow field, the sun symbol of the Zia Pueblo people, the native inhabitants of Flores' beloved state of New Mexico.

Now, Dan Flores sits in his office at the University of Montana. It is full of the usual makings – computer screen, keyboard, various papers, and enough history and geography books about the West to fill an entire wall.

The phone rings. Flores answers.

"Oh, hi Jim. Yeah, the best wildflower season down there is May.

Early to mid-May," he says ... then, a slight pause.

"Well, yeah ..." he continues, "it's a pretty good place to photograph buffalo."

Flores gets a lot of these calls – friends or fellow intellectuals inquiring about the best place for birding or where to see a certain botanical.

But Flores, well-spoken and appearing rather conservative until he turns his head looking for one of his writings and reveals a ponytail, seems to thrive off any interest in the natural world, whether from himself or someone else.

Trees, shrubs, wildflowers, birds, precipitation patterns. These are just some of the categories in the natural history journal Flores has kept since moving to the Bitterroot Valley in 1995. His face lights up as he explains how he routinely records the natural wonders and the nuances.

> "In mid-summer, 1996, I saw frogs and toads. The western toad seems to be more common here," reads one entry.

> By April 16th, the aspens in the Bitterroot Valley had little dime-sized leaves. They're in full color by mid-September to October, dependent on rainfall and frosts...they do not lack for brilliant golden autumn color however, despite their size.

"People used to do this all the time," Flores said. "They were called daybooks. Thomas Jefferson and other people recorded the natural phenomenon around them ... the first flowers, the birds in the mountains of Virginia.

> "The north alligator lizard seem to extend to the Missoula area from …," reads another entry.

> "Western delphiniums, biscuitroot, sagebrush, buttercup…," details from a stroll around his property.

Flores keeps a two-part journal. The natural history section is different from his daily entries, which document generalities like the day's weather and temperatures.

The more lengthy narrative, inspired by Henry David Thoreau's "Walden," is one he writes in occasionally with the intention of placing himself in the context and compilation of local plants, animals and phenomena.

"The world is a natural place," he states matter-of-factly. "I do think that modern life has divorced us from the real world and the world of nature. Americans in particular spend a huge majority of time focused on immaterial things."

Flores, who grew up in a rural part of Louisiana, home to his family for the last 300 years, seems to come naturally by the land.

"Even with eight generations in that same spot, my connections have been less to people and more to nature," he said.

That connection to the landscape around him is evident in one visit to his spread.

His home has stucco walls inside and out and a metal roof and concrete fireplace, specifically chosen for their fireproof properties and resistance to harsh winters.

Perched close to his home are the array of solar panels Flores installed himself, complete with backup batteries that store energy throughout the day. Propane is also used to operate some of his utilities in his home – a home with the typical technological conveniences of TV, stereo and computer that keep him connected to a modern-day world.

"It makes you really pay attention to the weather," Flores quips, about relying upon the sun to provide music, moving images and the power source that boots up his computer. "It also helps you save a lot in power bills."

And besides the problem that cloudy days – which are plenty in the Bitterroot – may pose if they become too consistent, Flores takes pride in his home's efficiency.

"My house works like any other," he says.

While most Americans don't know the difference between knapweed and Idaho fescue, the names of the flowers and plants on the land around Flores' home float off his tongue as succinctly as they appear in his writing.

"Looking at the Bitterroot Valley now … it's like looking at Oregon," he comments as he walks down the inclined hill from his home towards his sweat lodge, contemplating during every step how the characteristics of the local landscape have changed.

The meticulous detail to his surroundings has extended to everything on his property – from the canvas-covered teepee he built to the sweat lodge he constructed that is heated by lava rocks collected from the Snake River plain.

Both sit on the acreage once covered by knapweed that Flores has painstakingly attempted to bring back to its native grass of Idaho fescue and bluebunch wheat grass – a quest that began for him in 1993.

"With three million plants per acre, it's a weed epidemic right out of science fiction," Flores said. "A number of exotic species don't belong here and they've served to eliminate the native plants."

Risking looking like a scene right out of science fiction himself, Flores, armed with a backpack sprayer carrying three gallons of water mixed with herbicide and wearing goggles and rubber gloves, has methodically paced his property attempting to spray every inch and restore it to its natural state.

The ritual takes place every spring during the months of April, May and June when the snows have thawed and the stubborn knapweed is most vulnerable.

"I'm still not done," he says. He has restored 16 acres with nine remaining.

What has been restored has more than just visual significance.

"Without the native grass and wildflowers, you lose the animals that graze on it," Flores said. "The native animals that were here can't nest in knapweed. Elk and deer can't eat it and it suffocates out the grass that they can eat.

"Seeing the native grasses, you begin to get some idea of the way the landscape is supposed to work."

When he's not involved with projects at home, Flores is the A.B. Hammond Professor of History at the University of Montana and the author of numerous books including *Horizontal Yellow: Nature and History in the Near Southwest, Caprock Canyonlands: Journeys into the Heart of the Southern Plains* and *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains.*

His books tend to assess history and a sense of regionalism not only from a historical viewpoint, but also a literary one. He quotes writings and theories of environmental historians and authors such as Frederick Jackson Turner, Walter Prescott Webb and D.H. Lawrence. This passage from Lawrence prefaces a chapter on "Place" in *The Natural West*:

> Every continent has its own great spirit of place. Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality.

Bill deBuys, a Santa Fe-based writer and conservationist, first became familiar with Flores back when Flores was in Lubbock, Texas, and writing about regionalism in

Horizontal Yellow. deBuys said that Flores contributes a unique historical view with his non-traditional definition of regions.

"Usually people would just refer to the Midwest as the Plains but he would refer to it as the Plains and Rio Grande Mountains that border that area," deBuys said, explaining Flores' descriptive boundaries.

Flores derives his expanded descriptions of places from the various other historians he so often quotes in his writings.

"Walter Prescott Webb wrote about the Great Plains and how they shaped American society differently from how every other region shapes society," Flores explained. "Turner argued that how you got to be American was the product of an interaction between Europeans and a whole new landscape but that the end result after a few hundred years was not just a new European."

"The idea essentially..." Flores said, "is that places have their own power."

Before he laid down roots in western Montana, Flores spent 14 years in west Texas.

"Yes, I'm a place bigamist," Flores laughs, but becomes more serious when he talks about his deep attachment to the southwest landscape.

"When I left west Texas and moved to Montana, I was so rooted in that Southwest landscape, I couldn't let go of it so I never sold my house and continued to go down there and live at times," he said.

Flores finally settled on buying property in New Mexico to satisfy a pull to the arid environment. There he built his own home, as he had previously done in Texas and Montana.

All his writings to some degree express the importance of sinking into a person's local place and learning it.

"My big realization came in my 20s about how much study developing a true sense of place requires," he said.

Flores said it brought into his consciousness the fact you can live in a place and never truly be of it, except in a very unconscious way.

"Unless you consciously throw yourself into, it's entirely possible in modern American life to live in a place for 20 years and not know anything about where you live other than where the mall is, the local sports stadium, where your church is ... and that's almost all a lot of people ever know about their local place," he said.

He keeps extensive notes and dates on when the newest flower blooms or about changing nuances he feels on the land.

> The leaves are noticeably more elliptical in shape than those of the plains cottonwoods. Trunks of young trees look almost aspen-like. The female

> cottonwoods began extending their catkins at the end of March. Leafout is a slow process for these trees. *Spring, 1995*

> There are many other wonderful autumn shades along the rivers (willows, cottonwoods), as well as a variety of shrubs turning red and orange ... In the early mornings when I drive to campus, the sun is just emerging over Mount Jumbo and the backlight on the dewy slopes presents a wonderful montage of coloring.

For Flores, it's more than just putting together a basic natural history. It's his way of making sense of his own spot on the ground – along with the animals, trees and other living organisms.

It's also a quiet way of rebelling against a modernized technology-consumed world and remembering and respecting the boundaries nature has set.

"We're so encultured and our worlds are so constructed," Flores said. "I've always raged against the notion that my world is created for me before I ever get there."

This awareness of the natural world sprouted in him early on.

"Even as a kid, I had inclinations to keep notes and journals on birds," he said.

But it was the realization he had when he was reading an expedition by Peter Custer about the Red River country, the area of his upbringing in Louisiana, that caused him to realize the differences between his current view of nature and the natural world as it had once been.

The account detailed species like the ivory-billed woodpecker and the Carolina parakeet that once existed in that area in 1914 but then became extinct.

"I realized that what I was seeing around me as a kid was very different from 150 years previous to that," Flores said.

Feeling disappointed and a little bit angry, Flores adopted the larger philosophy of bioregionalism, which he began to study, live and later wrote about extensively.

For Flores, living bio-regionally means identifying with the local history, geology and creatures and knowing where your water and food is coming from.

"Adding *bio* to the word gives you the chance to recognize the notion that your neighbors are also the plants and animals involved in the place," he said.

"If you could wipe all the state lines off the highways, then you wouldn't know when you cross from Montana into Wyoming, and you'd begin to think of the land more holistically," Flores said.

> West of Missoula you see more big grassy foothills. The country becomes increasingly wetter, more densely forested and the mountains are lower. The sagebrush, junipers and ponderosas of the Bitterroot give way at once to more conifer pointy hemlocks and larches.
>
> The Bitterroot exhibits the most "interior West" ecological traits of any of these valleys in the vicinity which is a compelling reason why I seem most drawn to it.

Flores continually notes the certain ranges that certain species inhabit.

"By observing this, you start to get a sense of where the interface between the species is locally," he said.

For him, the insight comes from quiet walks around his homes in Montana and New Mexico – that and a desire for accuracy in what he records about what he sees.

What he said is missing in his "daybook" and what he hopes to prevent the further decline of are the native species – whether they are plants or animals.

"Stories of places have to do with trying to recover the kinds of inhabitants of places that evolved over thousands and thousands of years," Flores said.

He sites examples of the people of the Great Plains not having the same range of species to identify as native to their area because most of them have been eliminated or locally extricated

Nowadays, he said, people see trees from the eastern United States and Europe in the West and are likely to think that the birds they observe while on vacation in Hawaii are native when they are actually from another country.

"This has happened not from natural selection, but because of humans," Flores explained. "While they may be beautiful trees or even exotic birds, we need the native trees to learn a lesson in ecology."

It's the religious traditions, according to Flores, that puts humans in an exalted position, with everything else put on Earth for humans to utilize.

He contrasted this view to that of native traditions that did not have such a quantum difference between humans and other living creatures and often argued for a movement of personality from humans to animals.

"Because there was a movement between species, it's not like humans are set up in this special place and everything else is this lumped in a group that doesn't quite count," Flores said.

"Europeans looked at beaver and saw money and Indians saw them as teachers of how to manipulate waterways and store the water. Eagles were looked at for what they taught – how they interacted with one another or how brave they were," he said.

He attributes part of the lack of bonding to place to a society that's extremely transient.

"With many native groups having a history of 10 to 15 generations staying in the same place," Flores said, "they get to know the natural processes while most Americans today live in six different places in the course of a lifetime."

For him, this is all the more reason for a greater awareness of bioregionalism.

"He's trying to get people to ask very simple questions," deBuys said. "To ask them to step away from an American society of consumerism and to come to terms with where they stand on this planet.

"It leads people to consider what their loyalties are and to examine the characteristics they live in and their own allegiance to place," deBuys said. "These are not easy questions to ask."

Flores leaves his home with its solar panels in the Sapphire Mountains and gets to his compact office at the university full of books lining the walls. He proudly declares he lives "off the grid" and is glad his nearest neighbor lives a mile away.

"Thoreau said the best lives are lived with one foot in civilization and one foot in nature," he said.

Flores doesn't deny that like the rest of us, he lives in a complex society, and says that bioregionalism is more a point of view than anything.

"It's living in more of a way of identifying with the local geology and creatures ... it's knowing your local history and where your water and food comes from.

"There's not much any of us can do about the fact that we live economically in a global market economy," he said. "We are living on the produce of a worldwide system. Even water is exported and imported. Like it or not, we are tied into a global economic system that removes us from a few steps."

Flores said he's perfectly content buying grapefruits from the Rio Grande Valley or the Imperial Valley in California.

"You can't say 'I'm only going to eat locally grown food and wine ... you would cut yourself off too much from the riches of the world," Flores said. "But in terms of

point of view and state of mind, I absolutely do think that bioregionalism is a worthwhile viewpoint."

It's a simple concept, he said, in a complex world.

"Being a resident of place is just learning about it ... how the mountains and valleys were formed ... what local birds are nesting," he said.

"I just think it's time to begin to understand what the native Indians understood," he said . "To understand ourselves as members of the same range ... that we are natives ourselves and we're neighbors with the land."

"Has a Wal-Mart store ever stirred one's heart like a 1900s granite and brick building?"

Allan Mathews walks the streets of his neighborhood on the north side of Missoula.

While some might stroll along the same route in this area across the railroad tracks from the rest of town, seeing only small railroad houses and old brick structures with faded ghost writings, Mathews sees a story behind every building that lines the cluttered tracks.

Even the Pacific Warehouse Building next to the railroad has a story, he said.

"It was a distribution center for fruit from the Bitterroot," Mathews said. "It was all tied to Teddy Roosevelt's turn of the century effort to promote healthy living by people locally raising their own fruit."

Then there's the Keim building, also on North First Street run by the old miner and prospector Levi Keim who became Missoula's first police officer.

The building, with a grand Victorian look from the 1880s and '90s, was built to show off its crafted metal cornice to onlookers getting off the train onto the railroad platform.

Today, if you look hard enough, you can still see the word 'Drugs' inscribed right below the cornice, the letters as faded and worn as the memories of those that once frequented the building.

"Some people like math and science and don't care about the past," he said. "For me it was always 'Why are we here? What's going on in life?' To know these answers you have to know the past. You have to know what these buildings around you mean."

The resident historian only need turn his head and he recognizes the story behind another display of ghost writings on the side brick wall reading "Troy Steam and Laundry."

From this faded advertisement comes the tale of Lewis Mott, successful businessman and a friend throughout the community who lived with his wife above their laundry business a few doors down from the Keim building. Mott was a man whose fall from grace became a tale of public notoriety.

It was in 1903 that the brawl between Mott and his wife led to a murder and public hanging of Mott that hundreds flocked to in front of the courthouse.

"Mott had gotten into drugs and drank heavily," Mathews said. "When he returned home from a trip to North Dakota, to find that his wife had sold their business and property, during a Sunday dinner in January in a drunken rage Mott shot his wife four times in the back as she ran away from him down their stairs.

"Priests and ministers, even Missoula's first mayor Frank Woody, visited Mott in jail as he screamed for forgiveness," Mathews continued. "But the then governor and businessman John Toole wouldn't grant him clemency."

At first Mathews, who earned a masters degree in history from the University of South Dakota, began using in his own historical research firm, "Blue Rock Family

History." He would contract with a family, often for up to a year and through interviews and extensive research, provides a thorough family profile in the context of the local and national history of the times.

Then, after 11 years of becoming familiar with the intimate knowledge of various families, Mathews became the historic preservation officer for the City of Missoula in 1990.

In his 11 years in local government, Mathews has carried the restoration movement to a level no other town in Montana has experienced.

Under his direction, seven of Missoula's neighborhoods now carry a historic district designation, including Mathew's own North Side neighborhood, while nine historic markers tell the history of Missoula along the riverfront trail downtown.

More than 30 downtown buildings are on the National Register of Historic Places, 100 historic homes have been renovated and restored while city and county governments have even incorporated historic preservation into regulations for new subdivisions.

But it was from the time he was a child that he wondered about what meaning the buildings around him had – that and the fact he watched his grandfather, the founder of the historical society in his South Dakota hometown, keep detailed journals about the town buildings.

"He probably infected me," Mathews said.

Either that or it was genetically inherited because Mathews has felt a need from early on to understand the meaning of the things around him.

An adventurous boy, he rode his bike all over his small South Dakota town. Even back then, Mathews found himself venturing across the tracks to the north side of town to explore and poke around old abandoned railroad buildings.

"They fascinated me," Mathews said. "After a hard day of investigation, I would sometimes stop at a north side neighborhood grocery store for a root beer if I had traded in enough empty pop bottles to have the loot."

A crucial moment occurred in his lifelong fascination with old buildings when as a youngster he witnessed the demolition of the Carnegie Library in Aberdeen.

As he recalls through his writing, "As we approached Main Street, I saw the library's gleaming sandstone, strong and impressive, its classical columns seeming to reach to the sky. Its granite steps becoming to all to approach and learn."

"That had a tremendous effect on me, seeing this 'Temple of Learning' with its classical architecture be destroyed by the wrecking ball to become a parking lot," he said. "Maybe that's when I became a preservationist without even realizing it."

For Mathews, every question leads to another. Why is it built that way? Why is it in that spot? How does that house fit into the block? How does the block fit into the community?

"It's like detective work or putting a puzzle together... it's all a mystery," he said.

But that mystery is getting harder to crack.

While buildings were once built with circular columns framing a door just right, double-hung windows designed with opening in mind or staircase spindles laced with beaded detail each ascending step, more and more of these historic structures are being

demolished and replaced with cheaply built and homogenized ones. In the process. any historical elements of design are being destroyed.

. But for Mathews, whether its Baroque, Early Georgian or American Victorian, it's craftsmanship that he respects. It need not be perfect, only authentic.

"Visual integrity is the idea that you notice the details," said Mathews. " It's about knowing how pieces fit together to form a whole and if they don't it's recognizing which parts have been changed and what styles they represent."

Not that he harbors resentment for art deco or newer linear lines, only the lack of respect for any sense of visual unity.

He attributes some of this to the theory held by modernized architectural schools.

"Architectural schools just started turning their back on 20th century architecture," Mathews said. "You weren't cool unless you were doing modern design. But you have to show some respect to the old buildings around you. If a new building is constructed in an old area with old buildings, it should fit in."

As a historian the architectural fabric is also important because it shows why a neighborhood or place should be designated as a historical district.

Bob Oaks, the director of the North Missoula Community Development Corporation, met Mathews in 1991 while Mathews was working to get the north side of Missoula listed as a historical district on the National Register of Historic Places.

"He understands that houses are often better built when they are designed with more respect for humans in mind, rather than for automobiles," Oaks said about Mathews, attributing Mathews keen sensibility and aesthetic understanding of buildings to the fact he is a painter and craftsman himself.

Both men said the nation's epidemic of poorly crafted homes and businesses lies in the fact that many parts of the United States have turned their backs on the importance of architectural style that helps define what a community is about.

"Houses used to be built with front porches where neighbors could walk by and say hello to each other," Mathews said. "They were designed with the idea of health and air flow in mind, so that houses could be opened up and the bad air let out.

"Huge double-hung units that had performed admirable for decades were ripped out and replaced with 'sealed units' – picture windows," Mathews cites as one example.

"But the major way houses have been degraded is with aluminum siding and vinyl," he said. "You strip all the neat details, like for instance no longer having window trim, and it doesn't look like it belongs any more."

Mathews attributes a philosophy of 'out with the old, in with the new' as a western phenomenon and said it was as Americans expanded westward that development departed further and further from the European style more prevalent on the eastern seaboard where buildings were built to last forever.

"It's this whole idea of a disposable society that took over that's fairly new in our history," he said. "It's a frontier thing … the notion that there will always be a new place. But even 100 years of history is important."

Ned Kaufman, an independent consultant in the area of historic preservation, lives in New York City and has spoken on the topic in Missoula.

He cites New York City, with its seasoned apartment buildings as a preservation success story.

"There's a kind of conservatism when it comes to old buildings. It's one of the cities with the least amount of destruction," Kaufman said.

Kaufman supports Mathews in his effort to educate Missoulians about the theory of adaptive re-use that he compares to the European philosophy where space is cherished and structures built with stone and other materials to last a lifetime.

Instead, Mathews believes America has become a nation full of cookie cutter designed, poorly constructed boxes with a life-span of perhaps 40 years compared to the buildings of pre-World War II vintage, that were built to be multi-generational with craftsmanship playing a key role.

"We should be re-using all older buildings rather than just looking to the outskirts of town to build more," he said. "Change can be making the best of what we have better through maintenance and adaptation rather than destruction.

"By redeveloping, I mean in a manner that makes sense in the traditional way of neighborhoods by creating places that are pedestrian friendly and lessen the need for long automobile trips. This takes planning and effort at all levels."

On a local level, he suggests countering the destruction of rural lands for development by redeveloping the over 5,000 shopping centers that lay abandoned close to the heart of our towns.

"It makes a lot of sense economically as we run out of resources and as more and more people see that the homogenization of design is really actually very boring. Has a Wal-Mart store ever stirred ones heart like a 1900s granite and brick building?"

Kaufman pushes for a movement from just preserving the more obvious places to protecting the more informal ones. He said that just the sight of places in the cityscape of New York remind him of not only the city's history, but of his own.

"So place is partly the physical characteristics including the things we feel through the tops of our heads and through our skin," he said.

"New York is no different than Missoula," Kaufman continued. "It's about every one whose lives have added to their city and about a history that recognizes that those landmarks that are worth preserving can represent very simple activities – the activities of daily life …

"It's easy to say we should preserve the Brooklyn Bridge, but it's harder to recognize the importance of preserving the old tenant houses or that place where people congregate like the candy store where the kids stop on their way home from school or the docks and factories where people worked. These are very simple activities but we have to understand that they define our richness."

This same sentiment has Mathews beckoning back to the neighborhoods of his youth he considers the building blocks of "community."

"I think back to how much sense my circa 1900 neighborhood made in fostering the positive elements of safety, security, comfort, a solid reference point and a sense of independence as a youth," Mathews said. "There was an incredible mix of incomes and houses in my neighborhood. Doctors, lawyers, teachers and really poor folks all mingled together. And all of my schools were in walking distance – even the college – and our bikes expanded our universe for miles away from home. No parents were needed to explore."

He attributes the opening of the "supermarkets," a burgeoning auto culture and a dependence on television to the current decline of neighborhoods.

"I see teenagers being lost in this auto culture, living in neighborhoods without a sense of neighbors … a fantasy TV generation watching MTV and playing video games that has no connection, that is being fed rather than exploring on their own. Nothing is real and a numbness prevails," he said. "A community can provide something real in a world of fantasy," he reiterated. "You need to know what's real to survive in this world."

Mathews notes the irony created from a world laden with convenience.

"Where is a youngster's independence? He must ask his parents to drive him almost everywhere because of how cities are developing. Even his school is usually some mega-institution miles away from home. Instead of his universe being expanded during his formative years, he is actually more of a prisoner of our poorly designed cities and neighborhoods," he said.

"We need to look at change as something that's constant but reject the idea that growth in itself is good," Mathews continued. "Cancer is growth out of control. Boundaries can be necessary. Planning is necessary. Europeans have recognized this for centuries."

Although the history of the West and Missoula as a county and city is just a speck in the continuum of time compared to other communities and civilizations, Mathews' work is to remind residents and visitors it is no less important.

He hopes to provide not only an awareness of the importance of historic preservation, but an insight to the lives of those who shaped the present community

"If we look closely, we too have strong and impressive recollections of our own," said Mathews.

For now, Mathews walks the streets of his North Side neighborhood; crossing the railroad tracks where cottages that once lined the tracks still sit.

He appreciates this spot of Missoula – its cohesive feeling of architecture, the reflection of working class families – the fact that the neighborhood's original fabric has remained in tack.

"Really interesting people live in these places," said Mathews. "And some people find the preponderance of old homes and buildings more visually interesting than rows of track homes and streets that never get you anywhere because they all lead to cul-de-sacs."

After years serving as Missoula's preservation officer and establishing the town's historic preservation movement to an award-winning program, Mathews now works on personal projects and still gives his tours to school kids and others, often under the guise of Mayor Frank Woody or some other character from Missoula's colorful past.

"My goal is for people's hearts to be stirred by their surroundings," he said simply. "That pretty much sums it up."

"I've managed one way or another 'til now to continue a life that is half intellectual and half back in the woods."

If a person's sense of place revolves around where they are most firmly grounded, it seems Norman Maclean's grounding would be knee-deep amongst the river rock and moving water of his beloved Blackfoot River in Montana.

But the famous author, known best for his life's portrayal in the movie "A River Runs Through It," was a man formed not only from his Montana upbringing but his intellectual engagement and teaching career in the city of Chicago.

"It was often un-resolvable," said his son John Maclean, about a life his father struggled with and yet demanded. "He had a lot of trouble with it. There were a lot of advantages but it also created different tensions."

Norman Maclean grew up in Missoula, the son of a Presbyterian minister. Along with his brother Paul, Maclean's upbringing was based on two principles: strict religious discipline and life in the woods, both themes that run throughout the popular Robert Redford movie.

Laird Robinson, a long time friend of Maclean's, described the youth of the Maclean boys as one filled with an immense love for family and as wild and free as the land they grew up a part of.

“He and his brother liked to fish so much and liked to spend weekends at the cabin in Seeley Lake,” Robinson said.

A typical weekend for the young Norman Maclean and his brother Paul was being in a country so open that all that was required were two flashlights and the energy of their youth to make the trek from Missoula to Seeley Lake on foot in a single night.

Up over the Rattlesnake through the dense pines beaming from moonlight, their horizontal branches sometimes helping to form the limbs of imaginary forest creatures; across the Jocko where the feeling of isolation was comparable to that of the crickets chirping as if to repeatedly confirm their existence. Then it was up to Seeley Lake to the solidity and peace of where the land met the consistent slurping of a lake; where inside their cabin was the comfort of family and the familiar aromas of a Saturday morning breakfast of eggs, sausage, pancakes; the sound of sizzling bacon as welcome as a long-awaited Montana spring.

After the clanking of forks and knives was done, it was to the river with a newly-fueled body and enough energy to maneuver its tides; the water so alive and ever-changing, the ripples continually forming, the water ever moving and undergoing its metamorphosis, its color transforming with the sky’s light and shade, one moment aquamarine, the next mossy green from the reflection of an opaque sky. The river was alive; it haunted the boys … enough to make the long journey every weekend to try to understand even a little piece of its mystery. “It was different then because they didn’t

think twice about traveling this incredible distance … of the potential of getting lost or the dangers of it," said Robinson. "When they were in the woods they were at home. They were comfortable and they knew what they were doing."

But those like Robinson who knew Maclean intimately knew a man motivated by intellectual endeavors as well as the outdoors – a man with a pension for the workings of the land and the mind.

"Norman ultimately lived two lives but when he was young embarked on life as an outdoorsman," Robinson said. "When he worked at the Powell Ranger Station over in the Lochsa he saw himself living a career in the woods."

It was when Maclean headed to Dartmouth College in the East, that he splintered off from his brother Paul and began to quench a thirst for more intellectual endeavors.

"Roughly, I've managed one way or another 'til now to continue a life that is half intellectual and half back in the woods," Maclean would later write, about what became his dual life.

Robinson said that despite often being torn between two places, ultimately the sense of place instilled in him from his upbringing served him well in both locations.

"Norman had three loves," said Robinson. "In Montana, he loved hunting and fishing and his love in Chicago was being a professor of English Literature. When in Chicago his sense of Montana served him well by bringing a different set of values and

perspectives to the big city environment. What he gained from his intellectual life served him well during his time in Montana."

Maclean's son John said that the role of teacher is really the untold story of Norman Maclean.

"He was a school teacher but he didn't like the idea," Maclean said. "But he was a good school teacher. He wouldn't have been happy in the Forest Service.

"He didn't publish as a professor, he *taught*," Maclean continued. "That wasn't as valued but he brought a tough man, sportsman, intellectual Western influence to his work."

Robinson agreed and said that with his extreme inquisitiveness, the field of teaching couldn't have been a better fit for Maclean.

"There was hardly a subject that you'd bring up that he didn't have some knowledge on and then there's other subjects you'd bring up and he'd have in depth knowledge," Robinson said. "I'm sure it was having read thousands and thousands of papers where something tweaked his interest and he would go after that subject."

That same inquisitiveness and intellectualism drew students as well as faculty to him.

"They never forgot him as a professor because it wasn't a boring, dry lecture," Robinson said. "He was successful at acting out whatever role he needed to play whether firefighter, professor, fisherman or minister. A supreme court justice who had Norman as

a teacher put it best when he was asked: 'I understand you had Norman Maclean for a Shakespeare course' and the justice answered, 'No, I had Shakespeare for Shakespeare.'"

Eventually Maclean's ability to communicate and enthuse students earned him the University of Chicago's prestigious Cantrell award, honoring him as a teacher. He received it not the normal one time, but three.

"He was a great intellectual," said author Annick Smith, who first met Norman Maclean as an English student of his at the University of Chicago. "He just loved the life of the mind and that's why he would not have felt at home staying in Montana because he wouldn't have found the challenges to his intellect and been able to develop that part of himself as easily in Montana."

Smith, who re-connected with Maclean at his Seeley Lake cabin years later during the publishing of a "A River Runs Through It," and would visit Maclean in his later years during winters in Chicago, said that like Missoula, the Blackfoot River and Seeley Lake had a distinct relevance in Maclean's life, as did the intensity and fervor of Chicago.

"The big unpretentious city, the working class guys ... The University of Chicago was a really intellectual elite place, very rigorous, very scholarly and serious about literature and all academic disciplines and Norman was very proud to be associated with it," she said.

But Smith said that although Maclean split his life between Montana and Chicago, he was not nomadic – only adept at incorporating "place" into his life.

"He found these niches in places and stayed there and got to know them very well and that's what he could understand," she said.

Robinson agreed.

"When in Chicago, he lived the city life and when in Montana, he lived the rural life," Robinson said.

Smith also said Maclean was adaptable, if not open, to different kinds of beauty and loved not only his Montana woods but the geometric landscape of the city.

> "In the city, I cultivate beauty of several kinds. I think the industrial geometric beauty of Chicago is just beyond belief ... you can't be provincial about beauty," Maclean once wrote.

"He looked for beauty," said Laird Robinson. "Even in difficult times."

Robinson, who first met Maclean in 1976 at the Missoula aerial fire depot where he was working as a smokejumper and Maclean was looking for information on the Mann Gulch Fire that occurred north of Helena, in 1959, said Maclean suffered his share of hard times.

"Three stand out as his most difficult times: the loss and unsolved murder of his brother Paul, the loss his wife in 1969 and his own loss of brain function during his elder years in 1986," said Robinson, who had a very close relationship with Maclean up until his death.

But according to Robinson, John Maclean and Smith, the changing landscape also created heartache in Maclean's life.

"He cherished and loved Montana at a time when Montana was pretty rustic," Robinson said. "On our drives to Helena, he would point out the ranch where the Montana pig farmer killed his wife and fed her to the pigs. Other stories included ones about his wife, Jessie driving down the train tracks through a tunnel in her Model T.

"His sense of place in physical terms in Western Montana today would disgust him and specifically, he was very critical of the swarms of people invading "his" river – the Blackfoot – in his later years," said Robinson. "He would re-create his sense of place as he knew it as a boy growing up in Missoula and his summers at Seeley Lake. Most, but not all, of the sense of place Norman knew is gone today."

John Maclean echoes Robinson's view.

"His was not a contemporary sense of place, one that took place before the middle of the century," said Maclean. "Today, my father's sense of place no longer exists."

Maclean regrettably refers to how Montana has profited from its status as the remaining "Last Best Place."

"Montana has lost its sense of place," he said. "It's the newest yuppie thing to come here, but the yuppies are gone by Labor Day."

He also attributes the change to the homogenization of America and greater mobility in American society,

"The worst part is these franchises. If you're in Lakewood, Colo., or Duluth, Minn., towns have lost a lot of their local flavor," he said.

Smith agrees, saying that "as places become more homogenous, all the world begins to look like a strip mall."

She doesn't think that people connect to common-type places fashioned from a mold in the same way Norman Maclean connected to his cabin on Seeley Lake but still thinks people, through their memories and attachments, have their own sense of place.

"If it's the one mall they used to go to ... maybe all molds have something similar, but the one you went to as a kid ... that is going to remain for you a strong sense of place," she said. "But it's what this does in terms of your psyche ... who you become because that is your sense of place. The person who identifies and is most comfortable and has their whole story or history centered around the mall is one person and the person who identifies with the farm, river or the mountain which they know as intimately as someone knows the mall – that's another kind of person."

Robinson said that despite progress and the changing landscape of a modern-day world, sense of place is really one's foundation and grounding reference point to everything that happens in his/her life.

"It's your yardstick for measurement," he said. "It's the basis upon which you judge right from wrong, pleasure, beauty and pain.

"As Americans we are exploratory at heart and always have been and it's our nature to see what's over the next ridge. In the life of a Montanan, there's always a new drainage, new lake, new mountain peak, new waterfall, new prairie flower."

Ultimately, Robinson said, it was a return to his roots that drew Maclean to focus his writing on Montana.

"Montana molded Norman into what he was and provided his foundation in life," said Robinson. "His values and most memorable experiences were from his years in Montana."

"The rivers themselves meant so much to him and his lifestyle," Robinson continued, describing the specific place that Maclean most identified with. "The river haunted him and rivers haunted him. They created a real mystery to him because there was so much that occurred in a river and rivers are alive. So it's changing and I think it engulfed Norman's life.

"He was haunted because of all the things that happen to a river that he didn't totally understand, that none of us understand."

"The land owns us as much as we own the land"

Judy Blunt seems comfortable sitting in her small office; its four walls enveloping her in the diminutive space, so contrary to the environment of her upbringing on a Montana ranch.

She shuffles through papers and offers from the various entertainment studios courting for the movie rights to her story. She's not sure whether or not she's interested in ever selling.

Amongst her document-covered desk lie student works, the latest assignments from her creative writing pupils and student advising forms she uses as assistant to the chair of the English Department at the University of Montana.

On a typical day, Blunt spends 12 hours here; sitting behind her desk correcting papers and glaring back at a computer screen as she answers e-mails arranging her next reading or book tour.

Above her desk hangs an Andrew Wyeth painting entitled "Christina's World."

The 1948 painting depicts Christina Olson, a neighbor of the artist Wyeth in Cushing, Maine. The girl, who was crippled from infantile paralysis, is shown from the back. With her hair flying in the wind, the young woman sits on the grassy plains staring in the distance at tall barn structures while surrounding grasslands sway upon the prairie around her.

To Blunt, that scene of Cushing, Maine, is Montana – the plains of the prairie mimicking her home territory of eastern Montana.

"I'm just now finding it possible and beginning to explore the idea that my sense of place is something that I still carry with me, even though I don't live there," Blunt said about now residing in Missoula. "People often think my book is about leaving the land. I tell them that it's far more about trying for 13 years to stay there."

The book Blunt speaks of is "Breaking Clean," an account of the more than 30 years of her life spent on wheat and cattle ranches near the town of Malta in northeastern Montana.

It was back in 1986, when Judy Blunt left the only existence she'd ever known.

She was born in 1954 to parents of Canadian and European descent. Her grandparents were part of the last wave of homesteading that began in Montana at the turn of the century.

Until she was 7 years old, she lived on a Montana ranch in eastern Montana where conditions were so elemental that water was drawn from hand pumps into pails and heated on the stove for the weekly washing.

As Blunt writes about modernization reaching the ranch: "Overhead lights in barns replaced the dangerous, fickle glow of lanterns on the straw for the predawn, and after-dark rituals of milking and calving."

But that same lifestyle that may have seemed primitive to kids growing up in the city, instilled in Blunt a deep connection to her physical surroundings and the ranching culture.

She describes the views of the landscape in eastern Montana as having 360 degrees of openness in every direction.

I don't know what to call it – it was an alertness I had – an awareness of the land," Blunt explained. "It was being sensitized to sounds, to smells, the visual lay of the land, and knowing things about the land practically by osmosis.

"It was seeing the dust on the road and knowing a vehicle was on its way before even hearing it. It was watching storm clouds gather as far as 100 miles away, and having the feelings that were evoked regardless of the specific time of year, always laced with either isolation or solitude."

For Blunt, the mountains to the west and the flat horizon and town of Malta to the north became her internal compass, so ingrained in her that she still has a hard time adjusting to new landscapes.

"I had a sense of myself as the map lay and that map was pretty well built, solidly enough that when I left there, I would be in a different town and I would get immediately confused if there were mountains in sight. I would think that was west and I would locate myself instinctively by west … it would confuse me to see the sun not setting there," she said.

According to Blunt, if you lived in eastern Montana long enough, parallels could be drawn between the characteristics of the human inhabitants and the land.

"People in eastern Montana couldn't depend on viable soil or 11 to 12 inches of rain a year, so the people who stayed there began to resemble the certain 'lie-low' characteristics of the plants," she explained, "the sense of rooting deep, economizing in gesture and movement just like the plants did."

A woman of few but direct words, Blunt, like her namesake, reveals those same reserved characteristics of her homeland.

She says her "no-nonsense" nature is just part of how she communicates with people, including her students who often come to her with excuses about why they couldn't get their latest paper or reading assignment done.

"I have far fewer whiners the second time around," she says, about the reactions from students after hearing her own journey from a once sheltered girl to a woman who struck out on her own.

"Somehow their life doesn't seem so challenging when I tell them I raised three children while carrying a full-time job and going to school for eight years, never earning less than a B in any class," she said.

Patricia Swan-Smith, Blunt's closest friend, was a non-traditional student along with Blunt at the University of Montana. Like Blunt, Swan-Smith was raised in a small farming community and understands the impact of growing up in more remote places.

She attributes Blunt's quiet and condensed manner to her upbringing but acknowledges the transition she's witnessed in her close friend attributing part of it to her inhabitance of a new place.

"When I first met her, she was very closed," Swan-Smith said. "But as we got to know each other and got really involved in school, there was a special friendship that developed."

Growing up, Blunt enjoyed an education during her formative years that involved a lot of individual attention. Likening it to the Montessori-type schools of today, her classmates consisted of her siblings and a few other ranch kids.

"We didn't have the challenge of having other kids in our grades, which could be good or bad. We had to compete with ourselves which meant studying without set limits," Blunt said, who by the time she was in the second and third grades was reading seventh and eighth grade books.

But as she matured, those same mountains, hills and buttes of the landscape that defined her place also served as the perfect elements to revolt against during tempestuous adolescent years.

"Place was also a thing to rebel against – the 'bucolic backwater'," she said. "In a big city, kids may rebel against their parents, their religion … a lot of forms of authority, but in a small town, the town itself becomes an authority because everybody knows you – so it becomes sort of its own entity."

It was also the town's homesteading existence that bred a life Blunt describes as a daily business of self-determination.

"We lived where we worked and we worked where we lived," she said. "There was no separation or division in our day. There's no boss, but there certainly is a job to be done. Living was about simply keeping your eyes three steps ahead for daily life and survival."

The isolation and distance of the place was severe enough that the soil itself determined what a person's role in the community would be and by nature those roles were gender-defined.

"Labor divisions were commonplace and made for practical reasons for the good of the job," she said. "What they didn't take into account was personal desires. That was a brand new thing that I brought to my place – something beyond the traditional roles."

On the ranch, the power structure revolved around ownership of the land but Blunt was of the wrong gender to stake her own claim. She was not however, afraid to acknowledge that the female self had a valid demand for a personal identity.

"I was the first generation of women who left for no reason – as they said on the ranch – meaning I simply could not stay," she said.

She said it was that same thick skin developed growing up that gave her the momentum to break away.

"It's the same strength I used to step out instead of staying on the treadmill," Blunt said. "It's not distinct or unusual but unusual in the sense that I used it to break away."

It became even thicker as she found herself poor and standing in commodity lines that winter. With only a high school education, her three small children and people lined up next to her she had always thought she was better than, Blunt realized the sacrifice involved in the search for her own identity and a new sense of place.

"For the first time I looked around and saw how it would be," she said.

"You can either stand there and look at your own pitiful face or you can turn your back and start walking. If I'd chosen not to, I'd still be living on welfare in Malta."

After a year and a half in Malta, Blunt eventually made her way to Missoula in hopes of obtaining a bachelor's degree.

But even after being away for 15 years from the ranch, Blunt still has difficulty in large cities. She doesn't care for shopping malls, big crowds or movie theaters. So attuned to the silence and pure darkness that the night times of her childhood brought, she always feels there are too many people in her range of vision – that it's too light around her. She struggles whenever she's required to travel to big cities on her book tour.

"I've gotten better at it, but it's very hard on me. I don't know how to shut down my alertness," she said. " Before this year, I hadn't even hailed a taxi. When I walk down a city street I pay attention to everything because I don't know what to pay attention to.

"People are surprised when they ask me if I saw this or that famous attraction in a place like New York City and I tell them 'no', because I often don't venture outside my hotel room."

Ironically, Blunt said she is now far less affected by the environmental cues she used to live by.

"On the ranch, rain would have made a difference because it would affect my daily life," she said.

She now struggles with different issues, living in an actual town where she feels less of a community and doesn't have enough space to plant a garden.

"One of the things I miss about the ranch is the physical prowess of being able to do so many jobs – of taking the chickens from the egg to the freezer and the vegetables from the seed – that sense of being physically strong and knowing my way around a problem."

The woman, who still doesn't know how to ride a bicycle because she grew up riding horses, said she becomes desperate for her own land in the springtime.

"I miss gardening and I miss planting," she said.

She said adjusting to losing the only security she ever had – the ownership that comes with living close to the land – has caused her to re-define her sense of security and attempt to replace it in other ways.

“I’m un-landed right now and it does cause me great pain,” said Blunt. “I’ve had to undo my rituals and re-define my security. So I take it out in different ways like being obsessively responsible. I’m obsessive about keeping my bills paid.”

Foremost to her is the view that truly belonging to a community means more than just living there.

“It may be trendy to move here, but it takes more than a Montana license plate to have affinity for the complex issues involved in a place,” she said.

She said a sense of place is not something you can get from a bumper sticker on your car with the latest “save the land” phrase. It’s being able to speak a shorthand about the landscape and having other people know exactly what you’re saying.

“I see the connection to land and community really entwined in my head,” she said, about the practical aspect of knowing the only people around you, not necessarily as friends but as neighbors you depend upon. “Even the neighbors that let their cattle wander into your field were the ones that everyone turned up to help when their pig barn was burned down by heat lamps.

“Alliances were forged that go beyond casual acquaintance where you automatically forgot personal gratification for the good of the community,” Blunt said. “I don’t think it’s something you can find by just moving to a place. Psychologically, you have to be committed to a landscape just like you would be to a marriage – committing yourself to the good years and the bad.

"It's to know the inside of that place and not just how it looks on the outside. Coming from the inside means you're there after everyone goes home. It's a feeling of natural belonging – not just farming, not just ranching, but actually belonging there in a very deep sense. To not only know the landscape intimately, but to be proud of it."

For Blunt, memories exist with every landmark of her youth.

"We saw things by place name, by what happened on that land, by three or four generations worth of mishaps and accidents and anecdotes," she said. "We would describe a location as 'at that place next to the rock pile where there was the big rattler.' That would speak a volume."

Now, she not only fears, but is beginning to accept, that the demise of ranching life in eastern Montana is right around the corner.

She writes in a chapter titled *The Reckoning* about going back to the ranch to search for comforts in the familial landscapes of her childhood:

> It was not there. Cross fences jerked the land into new, taut directions. The world I had grown up in was gone. Changes had not occurred overnight … but in four years, more than landscape had shifted on the ranch.

"Eastern Montana has depopulated to the point where they can't keep a store, where there are now a lot of empty buildings and if something does burn down, there's now an empty lot in its place," she said. "Subsistence farming is pretty well damn over.

They've de-populated to the point that there is no more community out there. It's hard for young men to find women who will even consider a life there."

Blunt is sympathetic to such issues and said that the people most critical of ranching techniques are often misguided.

"Often as outsiders, people come into the state of Montana, launching programs to save this wilderness thing and eradicate that program, without taking into account that traditionally – although of course this will have to change – we have made our living from extractive industry," she said. "And so the people are consciously attuned to logging and mining and ranching that's so much a part of family history and also connected to our love of landscape."

Blunt said that once, while talking to a group of UM environmental studies students about grazing rights, she found them quick to make "blanket statements" that had been fed to them without any background.

"I asked them about the AUM land and they didn't know what an "animal unit month" was, which is a form of designating grazing rights," Blunt explained. "They didn't know that half of grazing rights are already given to wildlife … there were many things they didn't know. I have no problem with people who disagree, but I think to give the place the respect it deserves you have to come to any decision you make fully informed."

She also expressed her deeper feeling that the people who grew up on those very grasses simply do not see it through the same eyes as outsiders who come to that stretch of eastern Montana to see the unique topography of land and space.

"Our life revolved around the land and so growing up, you don't think of it – it's just there, it's part of you," Blunt said.

For now, Blunt continues to adjust to her life in the "big city" of Missoula.

"So many of the things I still know how to do I want to do but they have no place in my life any more," she said.

When she's not writing or reading from the stack of books that fellow authors have asked her to look at, she re-visits her skill of preparing meals for large groups of people she learned on the ranch.

"I go down to Poverello and cook for a couple hundred people at a time," she said. "To me the whole process is like an orchestra conducting a great symphony."

With her three children grown and gone and her ranch existence a thing of the past, Blunt now finds a sense of community from a group of women she cooks with and attends yoga class with.

"I haven't missed a Thursday of us getting together in a year and a half," she said.

But like the young girl from Cushing, Maine, the woman from the plains of eastern Montana looks forward while seeming somewhat unable to leave what's behind.

She denies waxing sentimental over her former life but admits taking a nostalgic glance back from time to time.

"I miss elements of where I grew up just like people miss elements of childhood," Blunt said. "For those of us that have a place-based sensibility, place is terribly important. I know people who are deeply connected to New York City, so it doesn't necessarily have to be rural. I think that's why place-based memoir is so popular right now. I think people are just so in need of that identity."

When it comes to her own identity, Blunt speaks with a quiet certainty about the place that most molded hers.

"Any ranch kid smelling the whiff of smoke on the wind would look around, or hearing the honk of a horn in the distance would know something was wrong," Blunt said. "It was about being able to determine things just from the sounds and feel of the land."

"It was a mutual ownership of the land," she explained, "that the land owns us as much as we own the land. And it defines the people that stay on it."

My own sense of place…

"Beyond the sin and glitter: For some, Vegas is about growing up, not growing big"

Driving with my niece, I glance over at her in the passenger seat, her head and small frame bopping to the song's beat as her lips move to every syllable. She knows every word by heart but it's her solitary stare I recognize. We pass sidewalks … street lights … signs advertising the latest family planned community and the next candidate for mayor and assemblyman.

Remnants of road construction litter the streets as the dust of tractors and backhoes warn us it's in our wake. And yet even now, after years of building and an influx of a million and a half people to the valley, there still remain beige and brown patches of earth left alone for a cactus to inhabit or a tumbleweed to find relief from its vagabond existence.

It was the tumbleweeds, adorned with litter swept up by the desert wind – the occasional one escaping back to freedom, missing its turn as it danced in to the middle of the road – that brought the memory back as instantly as my niece's anticipation of the song's next rhythm.

I had not remembered the air this way – as dry as the atmosphere bright – my eyelids could barely pry open a half-squinted glance as I emerged from our Oldsmobile

Cutlass Cruiser. Out of the various station wagons we had as a kid, I remember that one the best – its tapioca exterior contrasted by the brown strip running horizontally down its mid-section from bumper to headlight resembling '60s wall paneling. This "ranch-style" wagon was typical of the time.

It had just carried us all the way from the mossy tree-laden lushness of our home for the last three years in northern California back to my roots of cacti and bright lights – if you can have such a history at nine years of age.

But my anticipation of this new landscape evaporated more instantly than the sweat and stickiness on my legs and chubby backside from the hours sitting on the brown vinyl seats.

It was not what I remembered.

Why were we moving back?

We had moved to California to be closer to my grandparents, but the real reason was my father's desire to escape the gambling business. From 'floor man' to 'casino manager,' his job titles were as numerous as the casinos he had worked in. But this was the hay day of mob corruption and casino skimming and it was getting too close to home. What was his desire for more fulfilling work was overcome by the lure back to a well-paid job and a comforting familiarity with slot machines and casino chips – that and the ventures in California not as golden as anticipated.

My need to take in my new environment hadn't a chance as my bare feet were scorched with each step I took on the paved sidewalk. I was participating in a sort of tribal dance with the cement as my feet played hopscotch with the ground – not by choice but from sheer pain from the sweltering surface.

Funny – even the barrenness of the desert hadn't hinted of the extreme Vegas heat. Perhaps it was my sheltered viewpoint from the back seat of the car. But the blurriness rising off the center yellow line and gray of the highway's blacktop reminded me of the same siphoning air I'd seen funneling above the hot coals of a summer barbecue. It was an optical illusion, I reasoned, one produced by the car's glass windshield. Even so, I had no time, nor nagging desire, to figure out its secret. To look further in the distance was to see fractions of the world to come. Oncoming billboards with faces on them seemed huge and important. *Wayne Newton at the Aladdin … Ann-Margret at the Hilton … Sammy Davis Jr. …*

Some billboards counted down the miles left… others reminded visitors to stay at *Circus Circus*. That's what I remember of Las Vegas then – but my eyes were young and I saw things simply.

I saw things like the revolving shoe high atop the *Silver Slipper Hotel;* it's lot in life to signal the exoticism and Wild West world beyond its front doors. But to me, its high heel and sleek line covered in pink flashing bulbs was right out of Cinderella.

I saw the *Landmark Hotel,* its design like a rocket, its trunk full of rooms piled one atop the other like the steps of a ladder while its pointed top looked ready for take-off.

I remember the days I spent wrapped up by the cool fluidity of our backyard swimming pool – its comfort as desired and necessary as a down coat in a winter freeze.

Our pool was custom built in the shape of a figure eight – contrasting the shape of my best friend's who lived one door down. Their pool was rectangular in shape with a much springier diving board. While it had a chain link fence around it to prevent small children from entering when unattended, ours had a wrought iron fence painted white that followed the pool's curvy lines. It also looked good as the backdrop for my sister and I dressed in our Easter dresses in home movies – matching the white bunny hopping amidst the slender green grass and manicured shrubbery that framed our house. It was the same white fence that our neighbor Mr. Ferelli jumped over before bellowing in to the blue pool to save a drowning bunny rabbit who had hopped its own path in to the crystalline water.

In the summer time, the majority of my hours and those of siblings, friends and neighborhood kids were spent underwater in the swimming pool. To this day, it's the reason for my strong lungs and why I can run long distances on a consistent basis.

Usually, we'd swim through a succession of rings strategically placed for challenging maneuvers. This underwater course was fun for a time, but then I would need

to challenge myself with the deep end. There I would throw my hand-held rings of blue, green and red to the bottom and retrieve them.

I became very proficient at propelling my body mass to the pool's depth and grabbing them all in one trip. If I was really brave, my descents down to the porcelain surface included touching the drain. This required risk, and a spurt of adrenaline, from making contact with the pool's deepest point. That adrenaline would last through my ascent to the surface without looking back at the imaginary "drain monster." Perhaps it was from movies I had seen where the cast of characters included a bold shipmate who braved the depths of the ocean – only to discover the mystery behind the sunken vessel forever lost at sea. Or maybe it was the sterility of the drain, its power to hold the water in, or suck it down, that created some imagined evil at work.

Other hours in the pool were spent perfecting my underwater somersaults or pretending I was a beautiful mermaid with long hair that flowed through the water. I would hold my legs together to portray a fin and from the edge of my eye, watch my long hair chase me through the water. I was fascinated by how the water made it move in wavelengths and resemble the motion of a car driving over dips in the road.

But when sea monsters weren't chasing me and mermaids weren't calling, the pool was the center of birthday parties and barbecues. Emerging from the water after a full day of frolic always rendered the same result – a feeling of chill from the breeze of the swaying palm trees hitting the water droplets on my goose-bumped skin. And an

instant later, it was gone. As little girls, the pool also meant that at night, skinny-dipping was permissible, and an event that invigorated us while our parents were securely fastened at home.

As I got older, it meant feeling jealous of my older sister as I lay next to her in the sun, her petite frame the attraction of various high school boy friends, while I was still in what my mother referred to as my "chubby stage."

That was when the palm trees were firmly rooted in the earth from age … when their branches seemed deserving of their sway in the desert breeze. Then, houses were more than a few meters apart. Streetlights were only one to a block.

It was a time when sitting on the hump in the front seat of the car between mom and dad, the Vegas lights brought nothing but comfort, in the distance their alignment simple – just vertical and horizontal – like those pierced through the black construction paper on my Lite Brite toy.

This is what I remember from then – the billboards, the hot summers, the glittering lights, and for me, a certain innocence to it all – when the Vegas brand of rebellion was often endearing, even if sinful to outsiders.

Now, endless developments dot the landscape. Yards are contained by connecting block walls. Cookie-cutter shopping malls sit on every other corner made from a faceless mold. Both residential and commercial localities make areas of town seem like an endless stream of concrete.

The swimming pool that served us with hours upon hours of insulation from the arid heat was perhaps a symbol of what was to come – the man-made lakes and falls that help entice buyers to the newest planned development and tourists to the latest pleasure hotel. This, in a city where residents have set timeslots for watering their shrubs and running their sprinklers – where water is at a premium, if not a precious commodity.

But then the men who built Hoover Dam in a depression-weary 1930s never could have known that halting the currents of the Colorado River would provide the water supply and electricity needs for a million and half people. My grandpa and many of those men who worked in treacherous conditions and intolerable heat, worsened by the reflection of the summer sun off the wall of concrete, were just looking for a paycheck and their next meal.

On one of his trips to the Far West, the 1840s explorer John C. Fremont never would have imagined his legacy would be the attachment of his name to one of Vegas's glitziest sections – Fremont Street.

Or could have the California businessman Thomas Hull have known that expanding his string of motor inns in the 1940s and opening the tiny *El Rancho* Hotel would launch what is today the Las Vegas Strip. With a hundred rooms, a western-style casino and a pool set in the complex's middle, his aim was to lure hot and tired travelers off the highway from Los Angeles. Soon, his success led to the *Last Frontier Hotel* which not only established the Strip but the birth of a new frontier.

In the vastness of this desert land, the Vegas known to its visitors is truly bigger than life. Crowds hoard around the exquisite hotels ready to take in their attractions. There's '*Paris*' and '*New York, New York*' and any other make-believe world your mind can conjure.

And what once sat alone on the outskirts of town, the "*Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas!*" sign that greets visitors from Interstate 15 South seen in many movie classics and MTV videos now seems archaic and small shrouded by the growth around it.

Near that lone sign is the beginning of a stretch of highway that leads to Los Angeles and also serves as a jet way for speeding cars full of anxious commuters and visitors. Long ago, this route was first traveled by a Mexican scout diverting west from the Spanish Trail with the simple goal of finding water.

Now that area on the edge of town is full of the sound of aircraft noise from McCarran International as the airport has expanded and encroached closer and closer to people. It also includes a cemetery with a mortuary styled from the 1970s and a grave that is my sister's.

My sister's untimely death is a remnant of the very sin and corruption Vegas all too often represents – a Vegas that gambles away lives, sometimes even of the locals that inhabit it – with the relentless onslaught of gaming opportunities and the addictive behaviors that often accompany them. To say my sister's life and essence symbolizes the opposite of the disregard of the young woman who visited numerous watering holes on

her way home from work before getting behind the wheel and hitting my sister on her bicycle is to not say near enough.

Now as the sun sets on the desert dust making it invisible, the darkness is somehow safe. Outside the city, looking in, with a chance to consume the night sky above you and see the city before you, the lights are beautiful and they still bring comfort. Most still shine from someone's home and many symbolize family to me.

I hardly ever go down to the part of Vegas where the tourists gather but one night I find myself entranced by the dancing waters I watch outside the *Bellagio.* The fountain's streams of water are like champagne flutes with blue, green, red – colors from the entire rainbow – shooting vertically to heaven in sync with music. It's an extravaganza all right, but it's the natural elements of water and light that spark my insides as the city lights of my youth once did. Or maybe it's the lit-up face of my niece, sitting atop the shoulders of her dad looking on in childish glee.

Now, driving in my car with my niece sitting next to me, I wonder what the nine-year-old sees. These feelings of "place" and "surrounding" began for me as they are beginning for her – sitting in the seat of the car, staring out at the scenes that pass like edited video clips.

The *Silver Slipper* has vanished as the dreams of my fairy tales. The *Landmark's* rocket fuel was an implosion that left only dust.

And my older sister is gone.

And I know ... how differently we see things.... at different points in our lives ...

And my mind wanders as a tumbleweed misses its turn, landing in front of me in the center of the road.

It comes to its rest, not on the tide of construction dust, but simply from a gust of desert wind, but is there only a moment as it flees off into unknown worlds on the land and in my head.