

Wyoming Girl, Revisited
May 2021

Before I go any further, I must explain this musing's title. Otherwise, I might accuse myself of plagiarism. In 2006, my first personal essay, "Wyoming Girl," was published, by *North American Review*. The essay tells the story of a young girl, myself, newly departed from just outside Washington, DC and newly arrived in northeast Wyoming, during the first coal and oil boom. A city girl all my life, when I crossed the border into the state that would become home for, now counting, 47 years, I could have landed on Mars and not been as baffled. As the essay develops, I dare, in this foreign land, to leave the well-marked dirt path on which I and a friend have been hiking and wander through the prairie in search of a flash of blue, which turns out to be a tiny clump of harebells. In a way, that action was one of my first moments of independence and courage in my new surroundings. Other such moments would eventually follow.

Somehow, in spite of vestiges of the city girl, I've managed to do all right in this wild and windy land. Not bad for a girl who, in the dead of winter in 1974, crossed from Nebraska into Wyoming, driving the Plymouth Barracuda hatchback that had once housed my surfboard, my feet clad only in sandals (Not year round? In Wyoming? Really?), my only coat a bright pink rain jacket with matching hood. Morgan le Fay, the little cat who made that cross-country trip with me, was better prepared than I was.

Not bad now, either. I have survived winter and wind, deadfall and slippery river crossings, the notion of grizzlies, and a one-minute DIY lesson in backing a horse trailer to rescue an injured horse. I also now wear sturdy Iowa hikers and have a small collection of the warmest winter coats imaginable. Stories from *Wyoming Wildlife* fascinate me. Best of all, I gave birth to three Wyoming Natives.

I have finally joined the club of those who—as daft as it sounds from those who live in gentler places—call Wyoming home and love doing so. We're one of a kind; we've earned the honor. I believe too that only with the ability to laugh at oneself can we wear that honor with pride. And oh, I have had to laugh at myself too many times to remember. Taking life in this vast and sometimes vicious state too seriously is bad for the soul. Every time I set out to walk with a swagger, I've learned that bluster only leads to blunder.

My first stopping point, after crossing into Wyoming, was the town of Gillette. I had been iffy about staying there, but the motor mounts fell out of my Barracuda, so I had no choice. Besides, Gillette was an oil boom center, so I figured I could get a job and pay for my car repairs in record time. Plus, it was a colorful western town, where shoot outs occurred nearly every weekend in the parking lot of the Rusty Nail Saloon, where I eventually found work as a cocktail waitress.

Gillette was another world. I had never known such fierce and unrelenting winds. I had never known such a big sky. In my first months as a resident, I clung to the building on one side of the street before I raced to the other side, grabbing ahold of the nearest building. The residents saw me as an attraction; I was gullible. How many fall for the tall tales as I did? I believed in canned lettuce and fur-bearing trout (you know, it does make sense). I delighted to know that seafood could be accessed in town, until "Rocky Mountain oysters" were explained. I believed the

helpful women who told me that altitude adjustments in baking were unnecessary if I closed all my windows. I didn't believe the helpful mechanic who told me that with that leaky car radiator, I'd better carry bunches of jugs of water with me when I travelled. Surely he wasn't serious when he said that *nothing* existed between each Wyoming town.

I eventually journeyed to the University of Laramie, and after earning a graduate degree, I accepted a teaching job in the tiny town of Dubois, Wyoming. Before moving, though, I met the man of my dreams, a tall, lanky fellow who owned a horse. He invited me out to ride, and to impress him, I told him, "Sure, I've ridden horses." I had ridden Tony, a carnival horse, when I was about 8. All would have been well as I climbed aboard, but the horse was an Arabian, and oh boy, do they love to fly.

I had been in Dubois only a couple of months when, on an early Saturday morning, before tackling schoolwork, I donned a coat and drove a few miles outside of town. I wanted to walk in the wilderness, in the woods—an act to prove my independence. I walked for the full morning in those woods. In my coat of brown suede. During the first weekend of deer hunting season.

At Welty's General Store, I drew attention when I asked if they carried shrimp and then gasped when I saw the tray of elongated chicken bodies still with heads on. It was in my high school classroom that I, hoping to show the kids that I was one of them, wrote on the chalkboard a sentence that included the words "buck elk". The students were polite, said nothing, but at the end of class, the hall filled with hilarity. When the temperature dropped to the minus twenties, I was advised to walk the short distance to the school because I must not open my car doors. I thought I'd just open them quickly; that wouldn't do any harm. For an entire week, my kitchen chairs teetered as wedges to hold the doors shut.

Eventually, I returned to Laramie, to marry the guy whose horse took me on a not-so-merry ride across the prairie. I did learn to ride a horse, but it was not without its ups and downs. I learned to use a camera to record the wildlife we saw, but not without an initial full-body fall in a muddy marsh puddle obscured by thick grass while intently holding the camera to my eye. I learned to cook at high altitude, with the windows open.

Many muddy puddles since have appeared on the trails I walk. Many a tale I have still fallen for. But every summer, when I spy the first soft-blue harebells, I decide I'm going to stay for another year. As long as there is laughter. And I promise, there will be.