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Eye on the Environment: Words of the past.... Inspiration for the present.

By: Mo Hartmann for The Seeley-Swan Pathfinder

When I moved to the Swan Valley nearly four years ago, I was unfamiliar with this landscape and community. I was in school at the University of Montana, and had not made it past the Clearwater divide! I moved to the Swan as an intern for Northwest Connection's Landscape and Livelihood Field Semester taught each Fall. Along with the students studying in the Swan for 2 months, I too was trying to get a better feel for my surroundings. My first insight into the people and place came when I was sitting on the Swan Crest, reading with the students the words of Warner Lundberg, Evelyn Jette, Gyda Newman and Kenny Huston. These oral histories are a part of a larger publication titled, "Swan Valley: A Century of Change". The stories captured in these oral histories (and others that I have read since) have taught me so much about the human and natural history of the Swan Valley. As I have become more familiar over the years with the people, place and issues in the Swan, I often turn back to these stories/words as a reminder of the rural character many are working to preserve.

Both Kenny Huston and Dixie Meyer's words explain the quiet and solitude that a rural lifestyle offers. Kenny explains, "We've got freedom here that other people just can't even visualize, you know? Even now." Huston also used the phrase "*The Valley of the Hush*" to describe the Swan. "[That's what] Swan River used to be called. It was so quiet up here, you would go outside and listen, and the only thing you could hear was your head. It would ring!" he said. "Dead silence," he added. Dixie Meyer's words also capture the freedom and quietness obtained from the Swan's rural lifestyle, "I don't think they could corral us anywhere else. Neil doesn't like town and I've never lived in town. You can go out the door and do whatever you want to – ride the four-wheeler or go hiking or go fishing or horseback riding. You can just do whatever you want," she said. "It's just a free way to be."

As I continue to read through these oral histories, and learn more about the many hardships endured and changes that have and are occurring, there seems to be a resounding theme amongst them: a desire to preserve the rural lifestyle and the desire *never* to leave. The following quotes illustrate this connection to place:

Gloria Bush: "I just really missed the valley and wanted to come back. I drank the water. I think I made that mistake. You drink the water and you're sunk. You always come back."

Neil Meyer: "I am forty years a logger. There never was a day in my life that I wasn't proud to be a logger," he said. "I don't know of a better way of life."

Evelyn Jette: In spite of some hard times, Evelyn told a reporter this about the Swan Valley: “It grows on you. If you like it the first time you see it, well then, you’re just beyond hope, I guess.”

Rod Ash: “You’ve got so many opportunities to take part in a very interesting and beautiful habitat, and at the same time, in a living community that’s a part of that habitat. I mean, to me the humans and the animals and the trees and all, are part of a community. And you don’t find that easily too many places.”

Deep, rooted memories grow from a long life in the Swan—for those born in the valley and for those that moved to the valley later in life. In their interview, Henry and Joan Meyer talk about how the valley has impacted them. “I never knew people lived like this. I became a different person when we moved here,” Joan Meyer said, admitting that before she came to Montana in the early 1950s, she had never lived outside of a city. “Everyone was so friendly. Your neighbors all help you if they know you need help. You go back into the East and you don’t even know who lives next door to you.

During his interview Peter Klein exclaimed, “I developed a special love for the natural resources in the valley and for the people who live and work here year round. My neighbors are the best people in the world,” he said. As a newcomer myself, I share their awe and admiration for this Valley and the people who live here.”

These oral histories also touch on what people have done to protect the Valley’s rural character. An excerpt from Warner Lundberg’s interview explains his desire to keep his land whole. “I have a whole section here, that I wouldn’t sell an inch of. They think I’m crazy. I just laugh at them,” he explained during an interview in 1999. When asked why he held on for so long, when others in the Swan Valley were selling, he explained, “For one reason, my mother said, before she died, ‘Do not split the ranch up.’ So that’s what I did,” he said. Similarly Lucille Haasch Wilhelm talked about the desire to keep the land ownership within their own family even with the pressures of increased growth and land prices. “That’s just the way we’d like to see it done. I don’t like to cut it all up,” Wilhelm said in 2003.

The many oral histories summarized in “Swan Valley: A Century of Change” illustrate the power of storytelling and holding onto the community memories. They can teach us so much about the deep connection to a place, changes that have occurred, and the human spirit that will endure. The stories can help newcomers like myself to see a place through someone else’s experiences and more importantly to learn from their experiences. They offer a sense of the past, present and future; and offer encouraging insight into why we need to strive to protect rural landscapes and livelihoods. As development and other changes impact the values deemed so important to residents of the rural west, it is important to look back and listen to the stories of folks who grew up here and endured many hardships to stay connected to this place. When thinking about why people want to protect the rural essence of the Swan Valley, Evelyn Jette’s words sum it up the best “*It grows on you. If you like it the first time you see it, well then, you’re just beyond hope I guess.*”

Copies of the “Swan Valley: A Century of Change” can be found at Swan Ecosystem Center. A special thank you to Suzanne Vernon for all her work conducting these interviews and compiling these stories.