

Recollections and Memories of My Father, Merle T. Haines

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January 30, 2016

Wow! When Marv Alme asked me to recall some of the highlights of my Dad's early life, I first thought I could write a whole book about his life, not just a summary. He was a true Montana man born to Howard and Marie (Lejeune) Haines the seventh child in 1904, likely in the homestead cabin in Lump Gulch near Clancy, MT. They named him Merle Theodore Haines and he grew up with a rough and tumble bunch of seven brothers, four sisters and a girl cousin they took in. They were dirt poor and with all the mouths to feed, Dad and his brothers took to hunting as young kids and carried a rifle bigger than themselves to find squirrels and hares for the stew pot, ever hopeful to bag that deer or elk.

They brought the meat home as Howard was working in the mines for the most part. Dad's fondest childhood memory was the Christmas Santa left an orange and a pocket knife on his breakfast plate. The one dream Dad and his brothers had was to attend high school and go on to college. They all worked feverishly to get there and took any jobs kids could get in those days to achieve their dreams. One high school year, Dad and several brothers went into Helena where one of their sisters worked as a housekeeper for a wealthy family; they were given permission to build a little wiki-up beside the family wash house next to the alley. They got to eat leftovers from the family meals (I'm sure their sister did a bit of overcooking) and wash up and study in the wash house. It was cold and miserable but they soldiered on and made it through the year. After that episode Howard realized his kids needed their education and bought a house in Helena so the kids could get through school.

When Dad graduated from high school he worked in the mines and one spring when he was about 20, he and his brothers rounded up some nice looking 'slicks' bay horses. They green broke them and trailed them to Ft. Missoula and sold them to the government. With money in their pockets they rode out to UM Campus to scope out their dream to attend college. They tied up their saddle horses by the track and field area and watched the spring track try-outs. Dad commented to his brother 'I could run faster than that in my bare feet.' A coach standing next to him said 'Take off your boots cowboy. Let's see you run.' Dad immediately sat down took off his boots and socks, threw his hat and shirt to his brother and trotted over to the start-up line. When the starting gun went off he

raced like the wind and left the other contenders in the dust. The coaches offered him a full scholarship that day and he was on his way to college.

The University of Montana (UM) is where his writing proliferated. He majored in English and took courses that taught him how to write. He worked in the summers and his short stories arose from real events that occurred while he was working many varied jobs. He had some illustrious class mates, particularly Dorothy Johnson ('A Man Called Horse') and E. Kinsey Howard ('Montana: High Wide and Handsome'). Some of the young writers works began to be published in 'The Frontier A Magazine of the Northwest' which originated in the UM Literature Department.¹ Dad met mom during their junior year in college. She was a cute little flapper- dressed coed. She was dating Dad's roommate, Dave Rexall (yes - of the Rexall Drug store family). Dave cheated on her, she cried on Dad's shoulder, they fell madly in love and married three months later in May 1929, leaving college behind and walking into the jaws of the Great Depression.

The NTCHS students Dad taught are going to want to hear how the Merle Haines family got to Sunburst and what his teaching career meant to him. That's coming, but first the family had to get through the Depression, a difficult journey given the Montana job availabilities.

May 10, 1929, Dad and Mom, Fern Cameron, married. He worked in Helena in the mines and they stayed at the homestead that winter. The next spring, on April Fools' Day, 1930, my oldest sister, Bonnie was born. Circa 1931-35, they moved to Mom's family's wheat farm at Kremlin, MT, and Dad farmed with G-pa Cameron. From 1936-41, Dad went back to mining out of necessity to feed the family. In 1941 they moved back to Havre, MT, where Dad worked at the Courthouse. Brother Kim and sister Nan were born in Havre. In 1944 the family moved to Fort Assiniboine where Dad worked at the Bozeman Experimental Station.

Later that year, 1944, he was hired by the Border Patrol (starting a new career at 40) and sent to Dunseith, ND. In 1946 I was born in Bottineau, ND, and six weeks later, Dad was transferred to Sweet Grass. In 1948, Mom convinced Dad to quite the Border Patrol after Dad and his partner were in a 'gun fight' with diamond smugglers and Dad's partner was shot in the shoulder. I think it was more than that from my discussions with Dad. In 1946, the Border Patrol dissolved their pony patrol, and began to use only automobiles.

¹The Frontier began in 1920 as a literary journal edited and published by students in Professor Harold G. Merriam's creative writing courses at the State University of Montana (later the University of Montana) in Missoula. In November 1927, Merriam transformed the publication into a regional literary journal designed to evoke and make accessible good regional writing. He added the following subtitle to the masthead: "A Magazine of the Northwest"

Because The Frontier recruited as assistant editors, contributing editors, and contributors some of the best writers in the Northwest, its fare was generally first-rate. Grace Stone Coats and Frank B. Linderman, for example, were closely associated with the journal for years as editors and contributors, and it published as well works by such prominent authors as James Stevens, H. L. Davis, and Dorothy M. Johnson. [This footnote was added by Marv Alme to emphasize the quality of the publication that Mr. Haines' short stories appeared in.]

Dad so loved riding on a horse that he could not fathom doing his proper duty from an auto. ‘How can you aim a gun if you’re driving a car?’ he would query me (who can’t hit the broad side of a barn). He always left his gun rack hanging above my bed noting if no-goods invaded the house and got past him, I could defend myself. I always resented that because by the time the no-goods got to me, I wouldn’t even have that gun out of the rack.

We moved from Sweet Grass to Sunburst in 1948 when I was two. Dad started teaching the 7th grade and went back to UM in the summers to complete his college degree and teaching accreditation. He taught the 7th grade for ten years and then moved to the newly built North Toole County High School in 1957 to teach the English course requirements. [Marv and his classmates always said Mr. Haines graduated from Junior High with them.]

The one legacy he left all of us was that he not only loved teaching the English language, he loved kids. Our house was always full of kids. Dad would bring home and counsel all kinds of kids on their concerns no matter how big or small. We had a revolving door after school and on weekends. He donated to the Yellowstone Boys and Girls Ranch every year. He was always the favorite chaperone at school events and drove bus a lot. One terrible blizzard when I was small, he brought the bus load of (about 10) kids straight from the school to our house and said, ‘I can drive out in that blizzard but I can’t guarantee getting them home or their parents making it through the drifts to pick them up’. I was thrilled. We had a tuna noodle dish, cocoa and toast for supper and played cards and board games and then all stretched out on the living room floor (where the furnace was located) and slept blissfully. Best pajama party I ever went to. The parents were ever grateful Dad didn’t take the chance and the kids were safe and warm. The blizzard cleared the next day and parents dug out and came and got their kids. Think school was canceled though.

When I got to high school I had a tough road ahead. I had to be a model student and listen to other students make comments that because my Dad was a teacher, I would be treated differently. Didn’t happen. I wasn’t a model student and I did get treated negatively by some teachers. It made me strong though and along with the rest of his students, I learned great life lessons as well as the use of the English language. The one lesson that stands out was the day one of the boys cursed in study hall and Dad heard it. Dad grabbed him by his newly coiffed Mohawk hair in one hand and pushed his desk into the hall with the other hand and ‘halled’ him. That’s the first time I ever saw him angry and all of us were silent and gaping. We learned one thing that day. Never curse in front of Mere T. Haines. I also learned the hard way, never get uncontrolled giggles in class. My cohorts and I got ‘halled’ several times for giggles but were never drug out of class by the hair on our heads. When I was in high school we all referred to him as MTH or occasionally as Merciless Merle if he handed out a tough assignment.

Dad had worked for the Choteau Lewis and Clark Forest Service for many summers (1950-59) while teaching in the winter. We sojourned up to Glacier every spring when school was out. He had government saddle and pack horses and mules and was responsible for servicing the Half Dome Fire Lookout and the Badger Guard Station, building fence

and clearing trails. He hired several Sunburst NTCHS grads to pull lookout duty in the summers. Some didn't do well on that rocky and windy station atop a mountain. One guy kept falling off the station fixing wind damaged items. Another guy got cabin fever and went a bit daft from being alone. Dad had to get them down and replace them with forest rangers in training who could handle the sound of the wind and the lightening and still do their job.

Merle T Haines finally had his dream of owning a ranch come true in 1959. He, my mother and my brother purchased Rising Wolf Ranch close to East Glacier, Montana. When the Haines family purchased the Rising Wolf Ranch, they found the original 160 acres of the homestead had grown a bit, to 165 acres. The extra five acres were added earlier on, when one of the original homesteaders got in a card game with another homesteader during a big snow storm, and bet the five acres. Trip duces beat two pair, and the loser made good on the bet! I always thought the term 'Bet the farm' was a myth, guess not.

The whole family set about cleaning and reviving the old dude ranch and several years later Vern Mauritsen helped Dad get summer language camps from Concordia College set up for teens. English was not one of the topics taught. French and German languages took place for many years and often NTCHS students and their parents stopped by to visit and partake in Mom's great meals. MMM. I can still taste her fresh baked bread and fried chicken. Again, lots of NTCHS students came up to Ranch to work for the summer or visit and we all had great fun. The one thing I still get asked about, is the myth of Lizzie the Mask. Although strange things did happen with the location of the plaster of Paris death mask, she was just a myth and we had lots of fun spooking everyone with her showing up where she shouldn't be. However I will never explain how she got on the pillow of my bed one night when there was no one at the Ranch except me. Terry Wing and Wes Ekstrom spent the winter at the Ranch one year as caretakers and forever after, swore to hauntings from Lizzie. They were scared stiff when they got to Sunburst to report to Dad they would not stay another night up there. It had snowed the previous night and huge footprints were found inside the lodge past the door step and no prints were outside the door. They were convinced there was a haunting and raced right home. The Ranch flooded badly in 1964 and again four years later. Building new roads and bridges became overwhelming.

Dad retired from NTCHS in 1972. Mom and Dad sold Rising Wolf in 1975 and retired to a cabin at Swan River by Big Fork close to my sisters and brother. I struck out to the eastern part of the state with my government job.

Dad passed away at the Swan cabin in 1985 and was surrounded in a celebration of life by many NTCHS alumni and Sunburst friends. He will always be remembered by that twinkle in his eye and the twitch of the lips as well as that darned tooth pick or timothy grass stem he always chewed on. When I asked him why he chewed those items he said 'I was always afraid I'd smoke a cigar if I didn't.' Fat chance. He was the original fitness guru and sports coach throughout his long teaching career. I'll never know how he fit so much into one well- lived life, but he did, and left all of us with the legacy of love and caring intertwined with education to draw on. We all can tip our hats to a job well done,

MTH; you are sorely missed by all of us.