



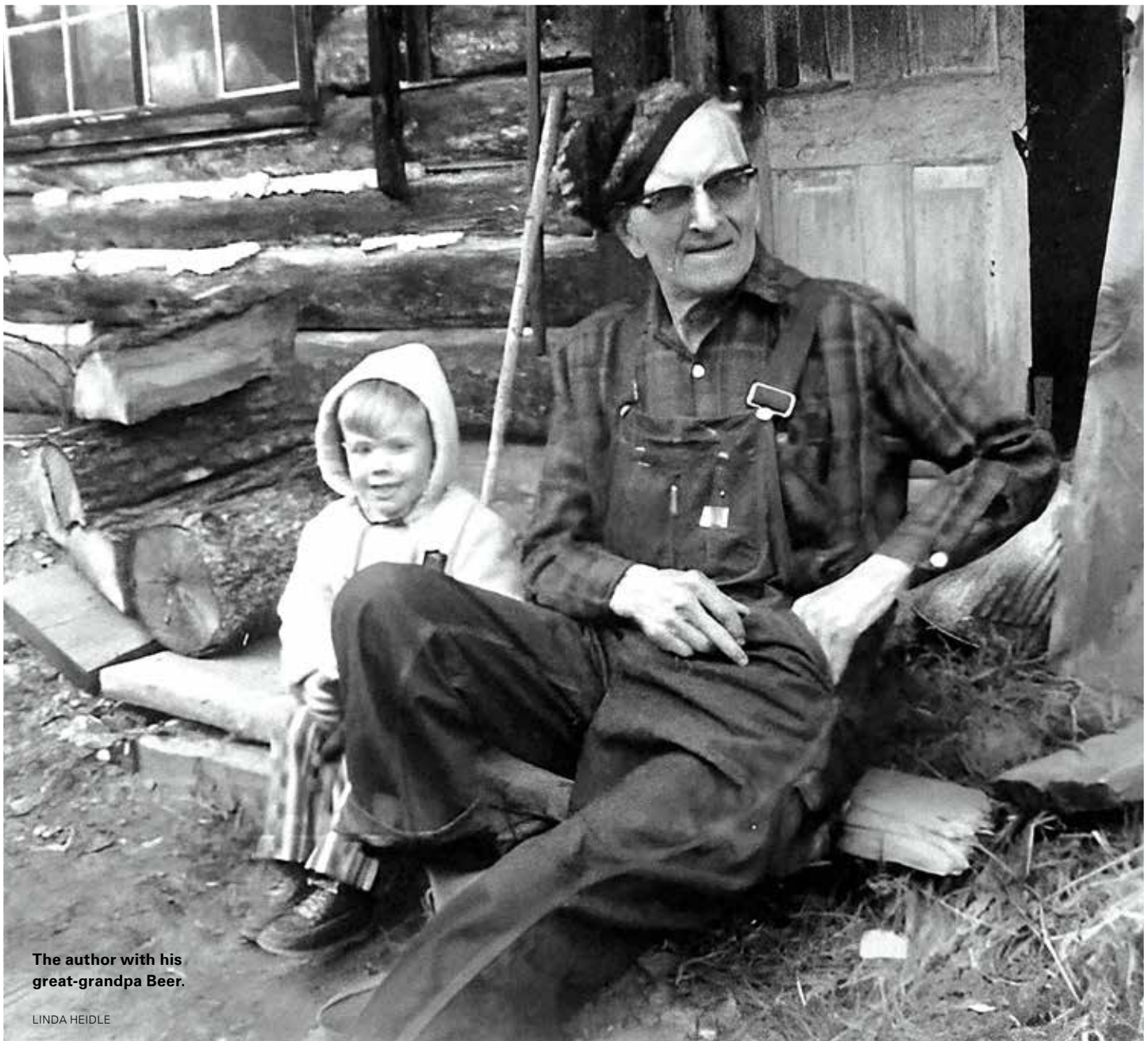
PASSENGER SIDE

Lessons from riding along in Montana



BY ERIC HOWARD HEIDLE

IF YOU CAME OF AGE IN 1970S MONTANA, you probably did so in the passenger seat of a truck. Being hauled down farm roads or along clear-cuts through timber or just across town, you could spend a lot of hours staring at the glovebox and at the world slipping by through pitted glass. Captive to the rolling view and the driver's monologue, it was a place to form opinions about the world while new little bits of it unfurled around you.



The author with his great-grandpa Beer.

LINDA HEIDLE

I'm standing on a stretch of brownish grass at Fort Harrison, a National Guard installation on the edge of the Helena valley, watching a pair of men in Carhartts draw a bead of Krazy Glue around the lip of a small ceramic box. My grandmother's ashes lie within, and the two men are about to reunite her with my grandfather here in this veterans' cemetery. Born in 1920, Jean Davis just missed the last great pandemic and survived the current one, finally passing away from complications of being 101. She'd only given up driving earlier in the year. Jean was my last surviving grandparent, and along with the ball of grief and the glow of remembrance comes the dawning notion that

you've just moved one rank forward on the battlefield march toward death. Along with being teachers and guardians, our elders serve another function: buffers against our own mortality. When they finally pass into memory we're forced to grow up a little more. We're forced to slide out of the passenger side.

For me, growing up was filled with riding in trucks. Camping with the family, hunting trips with my dad. Among my earliest memories are those of my grandfather, Robert Beer, taking me with him up to the old family place above Montana City. Awakened by my grandmother in darkness in their peach-colored mobile home in the Helena valley, I'd be

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bundled against the cold of a true Montana winter. We'd ride in Grandpa's blue Chevy pickup. It was one of a pair purchased new for \$8,500 cash in 1970, soon after I was born. Imagine: a man with an eighth-grade education able to purchase gleaming Detroit iron fresh off the line, and without a monthly payment, thank you very much. Grandpa welded a rebar stock rack onto the bed of his truck, and the cab was forever filled with hay hooks and chains and other ranch crap. I'd puzzle over the chaotic 4WD schematic on the dash as we'd roll up Valley Drive, past where Dan and Jean Davis had their own place (Grandpa Davis was a Dodge man), taking the back way through the Asarco smelter grounds in East Helena. Robert Beer was a well-respected blacksmith there, ingesting 30 years of soot he'd spend his last 15 hacking back up. We'd roll beneath the towering brick smokestacks silhouetted against pre-dawn light. The stacks, like my granddad, are now gone.

"Don't lean on the door, pard."

I'd wake, blinking against sun on snow as we rolled up the Jackson Creek Road south of town. He'd pull to a stop and chain up beneath the tall A-frame electrical towers straddling the road. Sometimes I'd get out and watch. Like everything I remember him doing, my grandfather wrestled chains onto tires with a calm, easy grace. He'd brush off his coveralls and we'd continue on beneath power lines which had already run through the Davis place in the valley on their way here from the powerhouse in Great Falls. Forty years later I got the chance to tour that powerhouse shortly before its demolition. In it, one floor above the turbines, sat a squat black line of transformers. The one labeled *BUTTE* had sent the Missouri's churning kinetic force zinging through copper lines across my people's land on its way to the distant divide.

Just past the towers lay a turn which left the road and entered my grandfather's land. Brilliant blue sky above jack pine and tan ridgelines. The truck would rumble over the cattleguard at the gate, and in we'd go.

TRUCKS AREN'T SO MUCH TRANSPORTATION IN MONTANA as a vital organ we can't seem to live without. They throb and grumble and we feed them till they fail, in desperate need of transplant. Like that more Freudian device, the gun, the truck's a part of our identity out here, where riding shotgun is seldom just a catchphrase. In fall during my years at Helena High, pickups with rifles hanging in rear-window gun racks lined the student lot;

no one batted an eye. Also, the truck gives us the means to go where we will, which so often is away from others. When I was that age the myth of the West was still deeply alive, and a man with a rig and cash in his pocket could simply go. My remotest ancestor to set foot on this continent came here in 1856 in the fastest outfit he could assemble: a wagon pulled by Mormon oxen, one of thousands seeking something better "out there." Millions more followed, in reality and in the fictions looped up in its wake. From Natty Bumppo to Boone Caudill to Phaedrus in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, going west has been the dream even as we swapped horses for horsepower. But it's a dream that's been leaching color the whole time I've been alive. My mom caught a showing of *Easy Rider* in late 1969, only days before I was born, and she assures me it wasn't a nurturing preface to motherhood. It matters that Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper go backward in that film, in direction and time, needing just a narcotic windfall and four wheels between them to flee shiny California for that least western of places, New Orleans. At the end of *The Big Sky*, Boone Caudill laments the death of the frontier, saying, "It's all sp'iled, I reckon ... the whole caboodle." Fonda echoes these words as he confesses to the campfire, "We blew it." He knows it's somehow all gone wrong but has no idea what they're in for. And when the bad news finally comes it's delivered through the barrel of a gun, stuck out the passenger side of a truck.

WE NEED THE PICKUP, though, and the myth it props up. It makes us feel free even as we watch it all slip toward that glassy horizon. In my early 20s I sat on the right-hand side of my birth father's truck, the green twin to my granddad's blue Chevy. We sat stopped inside the ranch, a little farther above those A-frame towers and a little farther down that road. Below us, a hired man was stretching barbed wire across land that until then had only ever had one name on the deed: my family's. Seeing a chunk carved out of the ranch was painful even for me, a child of suburbia. I can only guess what it did to my dad. To the right of the fence lay what was left of the place he still ranched; to the left rose a family landmark: the tailings of the long-dormant Veracruz mine, where my great-grandfather and his dad had delved in darkness for glints of silver.

Put us on horseback and no other details need change. That's what the truck is, and fast cars, and bikes. They make us cowboys, let us ride the range or at least ride away, as

long as we're holding the reins. On the passenger side you're beholden to others; you're along for the ride. But it still means you're wanted, and the truck can be a comforting bubble. An elbow propped out the window on a hot mountain day is its own kind of freedom, one where you're going every bit as fast as the driver but without the job of keeping it on the road.

A WIDE, long, massive car rolls up Highway 93 north toward Missoula, doing well below the limit. The 1968 Plymouth Roadrunner—a muscle car built just before I was, and before the oil crisis was a tear in America's eye—sports 335 horsepower and tires fat enough to put every one of those ponies to the road. Finished in Avocado Green, it's a car with no business rolling so slowly on such an empty road. But then, my grandmother's at the wheel.

Maybe 5 feet tall and lighter than a sparrow, Grandma Heidle in her granny glasses and white shock of hair would peer up over the vast horizon of the Roadrunner's dash, its speedometer's right-hand side a welcoming haven for cobwebs. In the '70s and '80s she hauled gaggles of grandkids into town, and seldom have car and driver been so comically mismatched.

But oddly, it suited her. With five kids of her own and a geometric progression of grandkids, the car had ample room for as many of us as were hanging around. Like the Beers, Blanche and Albert Heidle were mobile home dwellers, living in a trailer court on the edge of Lolo, back when it still had edges. Grandpa (Abe to his friends) was a terror to us: short but seemingly carved of oak, with a face like a skull behind thick, squarish glasses. His love for his grandkids was total but quirky: He'd threaten to pull wobbling baby teeth with pliers, or he'd flick an opened pocketknife into the grass at our bare feet. We spent long summer days keeping the bulk of the trailer between us and him, panicky sailors evading a fearsome man-of-war. For him, the Roadrunner would've been on brand. But no. Abe seldom drove anywhere but when he did it was in a small, boxy Renault 10. He called it the *Run-ALT* and was content in retirement to rule over his court, building sheds for the neighbors, tending his tomatoes, and gently terrorizing us kids. When I first knew her, my grandmother still worked at the Gibson's store in Missoula; my guess is that the job was a welcome respite from his presence, and the Roadrunner her speedy escape pod, spiraling away from Abe at a steady 55 mph.

EVEN THE FASTEST RIDE CAN'T LET US OUTFRAN WHAT'S IN our heads, though. Grandpa Beer may have been named Robert, but no one called him that; he was Bob—to my mom, to his friends, to the men at the smelter. When he was just a boy up at the ranch, an older woman on the neighboring place had called him June, for the month of his birth. Bob's true first name, though, was Howard, and truly no one called him that; that was his dad's

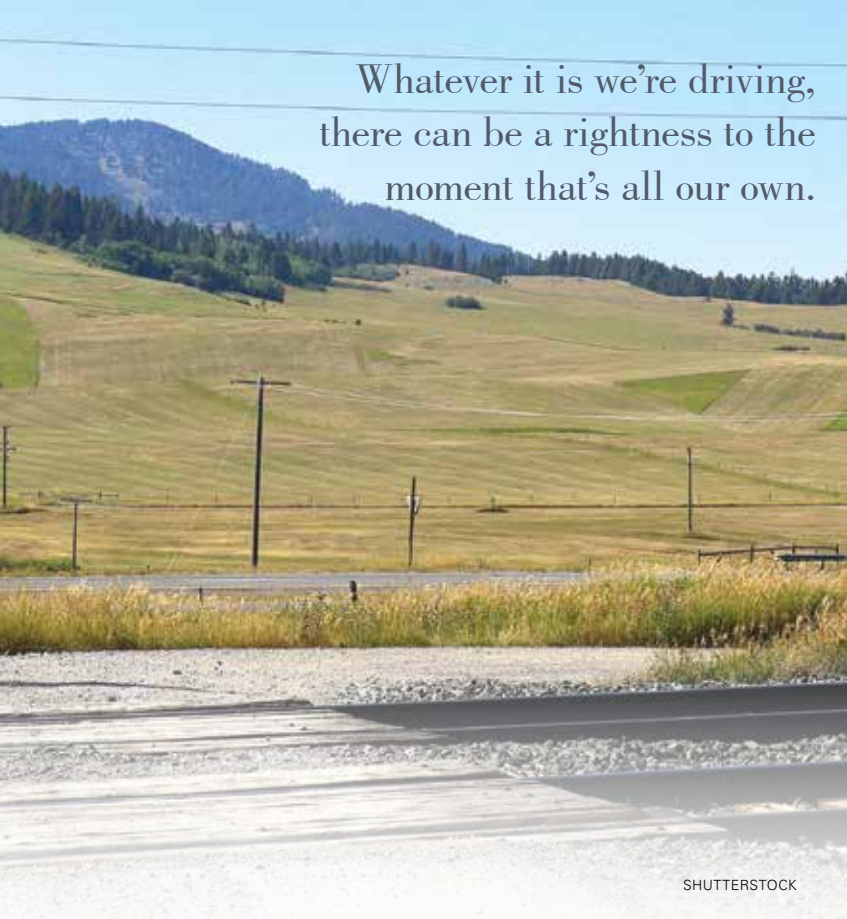


name. But it was dutifully passed down from father to son—and to great-grandson. Destined for the passenger side, the name Howard slid one place to the right when it was given to me.

Perhaps the last time Bob Beer wasn't at the helm was 1943—the year he spent riding the tail of a B-17, strafing Messerschmitts over Holland. Standing above me in the kitchen at the trailer in the valley, he once told my young self about a saying his crew would utter as the French coastline rolled into view below: “Don't shoot till you smell sauerkraut.” Then he flashed his wolfish grin and stepped outside. He refused to tell my grandmother how many missions he'd flown, and that one sentence was absolutely the only thing my granddad ever told me about the horror of those days.

On Sundays he'd trade his coveralls and Scotch cap for a suit to drive my grandmother Ellen (and sometimes me) to town for church. With me propped between them in the front of their '54 Bel-Air, we'd roll down the road behind its streamlined dash, a gleaming soda fountain of chrome and mint-colored paint. Grandma's baby powder suffused the cab and Bob would work the Chevy's three-on-the-tree with calloused ease. It was hard to square the man driving this glazed pastry of a car with the man who drove that truck. Here he was June, in his gentlest nature and fine humor. Up at the ranch, he'd once discovered a squirrel drowned in the big stock tank near the old mine, so he propped a length of two-by-four in the tank, running up to its rim, to make sure that didn't happen again, that any future squirrels would have an escape route. In truth I never knew the man who'd flown in the war or bent steel with fire, a dryland

Whatever it is we're driving,
there can be a rightness to the
moment that's all our own.



SHUTTERSTOCK

rancher and logger and a lethal hunter of elk. I remember his hitching laugh; it was like a bag of tools falling down stairs. "Let's talk about old times, pard," he'd often say, when I was 3 or 4. I was in college before I heard the story about how another man at the smelter had once tried to bully him out of the job, and there's little question about who was at the wheel in Bob Beer's life. His solution was to assure the foreman that if the other guy didn't lay off, my granddad would gladly cut his head off with a shovel.

THAT WAS THE ASARCO LEAD SMELTER, down in East Helena, and my granddad's pay helped keep the ranch going long after its thin veins of silver petered out. As much quartz and pyrite came out of the ground there as any precious metal. The copper lines strung from those A-frame towers still thrum over the road but fool's gold is all that turns up now, precipitating in the form of awful shitbox houses just above the old mine, blissfully waiting their chance to burn in this ever-drying land.

The mettle of our trucks has petered out, too, it seems. Everything's rounded off, all cupholders and heated seats. Plenty of tough women and men still do real work here, but the ratio of half-tons to acreage has forever spiraled out of whack. Despite their softness, trucks these days look like rolling assault rifles: massive grilles, frames lifted sky-high, black paint and window tinting, festooned with Punisher skull decals and Gadsden flag plates and silhouettes of actual assault rifles. My granddad's truck had guns too—on his mudflaps, cartoon

pistols in the hands of a scowling Yosemite Sam above the words BACK OFF. He was tickled by their harmless absurdity, and though his truck may have been a means of self-expression, he never confused it with who he was.

We use trucks too little for their intended purpose these days and know less about how to keep them going. We perch their shiny hulks in cul-de-sacs, whine when crude oil soars but shoot up anyway, addicts for a lifestyle most of us don't live and can't afford. Tom McGuane's diagnosis holds true some 50 years on: We're dope fiends for pickups, and there is no cure in sight.

Paying cash is no cure, either, and psychic debts accrue. My grandfather drove that blue Chevy till the last day of his life. While I was still in school, my grandmother Ellen passed away after a drawn-out, wasting bout of cancer. Bereft and unable to be alone, Bob soon remarried, occupying another trailer in the valley while he built a proper home up at the ranch. But the marriage was unhappy, and having quit his retirement job buzzing pine trees into firewood he may have felt there was nothing left to do. The house at the ranch finished, he attended my graduation in the spring of 1988. I hugged him in the hallway as my classmates filed into the school's steaming gym; he'd arrived too late to grab a seat. Earlier in the day he'd put a small graduation present into my hand—the keys to the Bel-Air. It was as sure a passing of the torch as any. Days later he was up at the new house, alone for the night following a spat. Beyond those A-frame towers, at the very end of that road which now bears his name, my grandfather took his foot off the gas for good. Some mix of booze, pills, war, age, and loneliness simply seems to have taken hold. We'll never know now, but at some point he may have changed his mind or simply wanted to be where he felt safe. When he was found, he was at the wheel of his truck.

WE ALL HAVE TO MAKE OUR OWN WAY, and there are no guarantees. Perhaps we die in time, before what's around us changes more than we can bear, and if we leave with a measure of grace we've surely paid our debt in full.

While we're here, we're granted the gift of remembering what was best and holding on to what we have. Family, places still untouched, a glint of sun on snowy peaks come June. We have the power to hop in and fire 'er up, barrel down a dirt lane on a summer afternoon, one hand on the wheel and a cold one in the other. And whatever it is we're driving, there can be a rightness to the moment that's all our own. As Paul Zarzyski had it, "We mosey home, me and the old truck ... not one speck of simplistic myth between us and the West that was. ..."

With luck we all have miles to go before we mosey home, good miles on straight roads leading us places we hope to go. The ride's all too short, so drink in the view and keep the muddy side down. Call us when you get there. Even if it's all our lives, we spend precious little time with a hand on the wheel, a foot on the gas, and firmly, if briefly, in the driver's seat. ■