

MONTANA

True American beauty

Remember this scene from the film, *American Beauty*? The creepy young drug dealer is watching a home video.

The subject of the video? A flimsy plastic bag that flits about in the wind, flying like . . . well, a plastic bag blowing in the wind. The kid turns to his girlfriend and blubbers, "Sometimes I see so much beauty in the world I can hardly stand it."

It's a quirky moment in a quirky movie, a moment when I always bark at the TV set: "Hey, kid, it's garbage. Pick it up. Toss it in the trash and move on."

Getting that emotional over a trash bag. *Yeesh!* Lucky for him, the kid wasn't seeing Montana.

Wouldn't you like to take somebody like that to where the plains rise up to the north slope of Gold Butte in the Sweet Grass Hills of a spring day? Let him stand there floating in a calf-deep sea of lavender lupines. If he ever saw that, he'd weep himself into dehydration.

Trash bag. For Pete's sake.

Or plunk him down in eastern Montana where the waist-high sage is so pungent in summer you dare not light a match. Keep him there until a B-52 grouse lumbers into the air over his head. Make him stand there until he gets a load of the antelope, eyes bulging like eight-balls, the herds grazing peacefully on the Savanna of Montana until the kid blinks too loudly, and they stampede, standing-start to 60 miles an hour on legs skinny as pool cues, in what, four seconds? He'd be left so breathless you'd have to give him—*Yuk!*—mouth-to-mouth.

In the fall you could take him to one of a thousand beaver ponds still as glass, the aspen leaves trembling electric yellow, the water glassy, the air so fresh he'd try to inhale it until his withered lungs burst. You could let him get dizzy with the sight of it, then take him a hundred steps downstream and show him yet another pond even more



A beaver pond in the fall lights up Alice Creek not far from Lincoln.

gorgeous. And so on, and so on—until you overdose him on beauty, not drugs.

Or drag him to any spot on the Continental Divide on a blustery winter morning and leave him standing in a dark, monochrome landscape on the west side looking beneath the clouds through a keyhole in the mountains to sunrise on the Rocky Mountain Front, the foothills and flat-top buttes a red so vibrant Charlie Russell couldn't have captured it. Let him feel what it's like to find your body on one side of the Divide, your soul on the other.

Wouldn't you like to tell him, "Kid, meet beauty."

Make him stand there until he said it: "Sometimes I see so much beauty in Montana, I can hardly stand it."

Which is where I'm coming from in starting a new column as editor of *RM*, "The Face of Montana." Sometimes the face is a place. Sometimes it's a person. Sometimes it's a critter.

I want citizens in the Flathead Valley to get a look at the quality of life in Opheim, Circle, Poplar, Lewistown. And I want to introduce our eastern Montana citizens to the concerns and lifestyles from the peaks and valleys along the Divide, the top and the bottom, the back and the Front of our great state. I want to interact with people of every size and shape and color and frame of mind.

So beware. If a guy hands you a business card and says he's the editor of *RM*, you could be the next face of Montana, even if you aren't as beautiful as a beaver pond in fall.

For the record, like you, I'll miss Mack McConnell, my predecessor here. I discovered Mack when I was editor of the weekly *Shelby Promoter*. I read his column, just as you did. I used material from the magazine at times. But probably I won't miss him as much as you.

Because I coveted his job. *RM* would arrive in the mail, and I'd think, "Who gets to travel Montana from top to bottom, end to end, taking pictures, meeting people, gawking at the animals, marveling at the majesty of both mountain and plains. Who gets a job like that?"

Answer: Somebody else who loves to gawk and talk.

My wife and kids are always nagging at the gawking part as I drive across the state looking for birds, bears, odd shadows and the ever elusive elk. And I'm always embarrassing them when I speak to strangers. *Da-ad, what are you doing? You're such a dweeb.*

Hey, dweeb or no, it's my job to gawk. It's my mission to talk to strangers. Somebody's got to help the world recognize the difference between real beauty and trash blowing in the wind. Somebody has to find and photograph the face of Montana and get paid for it. Might as well be me, kids.

Oh, wait, I remember. *It is me.*

RM is my job, and Montana is my passion—I seem to have skipped a step in getting to heaven. *RM*