

A poker face for all time — and no credit



The face scowling at you beneath the brim of that three-year-old-but-only-worn-once hat? It's our face of Montana this national Co-op Month.

It belongs to rancher Charles Patten of Broadus, long-time trustee at Tongue River Electric Cooperative, based in Ashland.

I wanted a perspective on Montana electric co-ops, using an eye witness to the early days of stringing wire to farms, ranches and towns.

"Talk to Charles Patten down at Tongue River," one helpful soul told me. "He rode the countryside on horseback to sign up neighbors for the co-op."

Yeah, well, fine, but isn't he the crabby looking guy on Tongue River's page in the association directory?

"He'd be a great one to talk to for your history."

But . . .

I'm uneasy. I do not help

my case when I ask him over the telephone if 8 a.m. is too early to meet for breakfast. I mean no harm, only, *Would your chores be done by then?* But it's out there, a question you do not ask a rancher.

I walk into the diner at 7:55, but you can never be anyplace five minutes earlier than a rancher. Charles looks up from beneath the brim of a ratty Stetson pulled down tight, his ears shimmying the hat to his head like a bull rider. He looks a little owly.

I ask about signing up members from horseback.

"I did some riding," he says between sips of coffee "but not very much."

Silence. Long and awkward. I check my notepad. I have his name and the date. Probably not enough for a magazine story.

So we ease into breakfast and chit-chat. Before long we are laughing at his stories.

I take notes. My co-op his-

torical takes shape. It begins on page 8 of this *RM*.

The waitress comes by to refill his coffee cup — with hot water, it turns out.

"I can't drink coffee anymore," he says. A medical issue. "The hot water fools my belly into thinking it's getting coffee." A weak and crooked grin.

I feel your pain, Charles.

By the end of breakfast, we are not exactly best friends, but we're halter-broke well enough to each other's comfort zone. I see that his scowly photos have him wrong.

Speaking of photos, I need to take some.

We go to a corral where he keeps a pair of horses — at 75 he still prefers the four hooves to four-wheelers.

I'm snapping pictures.

"This is Buck," he says. *Snap.* "He's just about my top horse now."

Snap.

"Buck?" I wonder out loud. "Is that a good name for a horse?"

It brings a belly laugh. And a smile. "It's because he's a buckskin." It's a good smile.

I aim the lens at his face.

That scowl drops like a spilling bucket of gravel.

Okay, so I focus elsewhere.

He smiles.

I aim.

He scowls.

What's with this?

Eventually he offers, "A lot of people think I'm grumpy from the way I look in the pictures."

You don't say.

"I used to deal poker. After I would win all their money, guys'd start begging me for a few chips to stay in the game. I'd give them that look and tell them, 'No credit.' it's my no-credit look."

There was a few more words in there, not all of them printable. But you get the idea. It's his image.

More pictures. *Snap-snap.* Except for no smile, he behaves. I ask him to sit in the cab of his truck. He does.

I point the camera.

The bucket of gravel begins to spill.

"That's it. Give me that no-credit smile." Using a few of those unprintable words he's just taught me.

It cracks him up.

Snappety-snap-snap.

He can smile. There's the proof of it, below.

And Charles is busted.

He's not such a curmudgeon, after all. Anybody in Montana can get that smile from him, by asking for the no-credit look. The key is to use a few unprintable words.

Seems a shame to wreck an image like that. Charles is the kind of fella I'd like to spend a day with, riding the range aboard a gentle horse. But I can't. Not now. He'd get even, put me on a horse named worse'n Buck, say, Kicker. Or Chomper.

And I'm not about to risk getting on a critter named Punkin Pie only to find out that it's an alias for Killer.

