

Big Sky. Big Land. Big History.

Montana

Historical Society

March 15, 2019

Heritage Keeper Awards Chair
Montana Historical Society
P.O. Box 201201, 225 North Roberts
Helena, MT 59620-1201

Nominee:

Darrel and Carolyn Sperry
807 Old Corvallis Road
Corvallis, MT 59828
riverbottombeef@gmail.com

406-961-3894

Nomination Submitted by:

Ravalli County Right to Farm and
Ranch Board
3652 Meyer Lane
Stevensville, MT 59870
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406-207-7808

1. Contributions to Montana History---please describe the project or on-going service within Montana's historical community that has been accomplished by the nominee. (Limit 500 words)

1. Contributions to Montana History – their project are an on-going service within Montana’s historical community. (483 words)

The Ravalli County Right to Farm and Ranch Board has been an appointed board of the Ravalli County Commissioners for twenty years. This board nominates Darrel and Carolyn Sperry of Corvallis, Montana for the Montana Historical Society Board of Trustees’ Heritage Keeper & Heritage Guardian Award. Darrel and Carolyn Sperry have lived in the Bitter Root Valley near Corvallis, Montana their entire lives. Both grew up in this community. They are being nominated together for one award because they have always worked side by side, making decisions together, and supporting one another. Their passion for agriculture oozes out of them as they share their lifestyle, and knowledge to young and old alike. Along with this fondness for agriculture they have helped 4-H and FFA youth with farm tours, machinery exhibitions, and sponsorships. However, the most outstanding part of Sperry’s contribution to history is their working and restored farm equipment they not only display but actually run and perform harvesting tasks as the machines were designed to handle. Each year the Sperry’s plan their crops, rotational crops, and harvesting time tables. Their planning includes their fields being very visible by the public. Each year residents of Ravalli County look forward to the harvest of oats. Sperry’s have a restored binder. Pulled by an early model 2 cylinder John Deere tractor the binder cuts the oats and binds the oats into small bundles, the bundles then are gathered into shocks. The shocks are loaded onto the bundle wagon. All this activity is easily watched from the roads or the edge of the field. Observers are watching these activities throughout the harvesting that uses these functional antique machines. The shocks are left in the field to dry. Once dry they are pitched by hand onto the bundle wagon. This is just the beginning stage of the harvest, now the oats need to be thrashed. Sperry’s tirelessly take all their restored antiques necessary to separate the grain from the stalks and grain from the chaff to the Ravalli County Fairgrounds to demonstrate the historical process for the public to see at the county fair. Many machines are taken, several two cylinder John Deere tractors of varied horsepower, stationary threshing machines, fanning machines, hammer mills, seed cleaning machines, pitchforks, and other necessary hand tools, lubricants, gunny sacks, etc. Also, there is a hand tie stationary baler used to put the straw into bales. All of these implements are powered using belts that turn pulleys. The belts are initially powered from the belt drive on each tractor. This demonstration is scheduled daily and draws a big audience of spectators of all ages. The Fair Board praises this program. The historical value is tremendous, because the machines are museum pieces that function. Machines from the early 1900s through the 1950s are on display. Members of the local “Tired Iron Club” talk about and field questions each day for the fairgoers.

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2. What are the particular strengths and impacts of the Montana History goals the nominee has achieved? What impact has the work accomplished had on the community/intended audience? (Limit 500 words)

2. What are the particular strengths and impacts of the Montana history goals the nominee has achieved? (497 words)

The Sperry's are 'standouts' in what they do and contribute to agriculture. The Sperry's roots are deep and go back into the 1800s. The Salish Indians practiced farming techniques and claimed land while improving it with irrigation, tilling of soil, planting seeds and harvesting crops. Likewise, early white man came to the valley to settle and farm land. Both Carolyn's and Darrel's families began here in the Heart of the Bitter Root Valley settling the land and being agricultural stewards of their land. Not only are those historical facts important to the Sperry's; they appreciate all of the progression their ancestors tediously made using what crude farm implements and the technology of the times had to offer, to work the land throughout the decades to what is currently in place. With their personal and intimate history of agriculture and farming practices they are always sharing with their community and all residents of the Bitter Root Valley. They continue to restore and revitalize equipment to usable states and display their work for the benefit of others.

Their history of hard work and diversity of techniques and crops and livestock have always been part of the Sperry legacy. In the last thirty to forty year window of time, Sperry's have practiced many innovative agricultural achievements. They have been pioneers in many ventures that were considered unconventional considering the growing season parameters, the elevation of the valley, the latitude of the area, etc. Who would have thought farmers in this environment could harvest 'dented' corn, or ripened soybeans? They are really pioneers, in this area of farmers, to plant mint, harvest, extract its oil, and market it successfully. Bio-diesel is made from canola or other oil produced from crops grown on the Sperry farms. Soybean oil and protein meal is produced and used within their diverse livestock and crop programs. Other local producers buy their corn kernels and protein meal from soybeans and corn crops grown by the Sperry's. Portions of their crops that may not be readily marketable are utilized by a heating system designed to burn this material. This provides heating to their shops and outbuildings as well as their home. The innovations that visitors are exposed to at the Sperry farm seem endless.

Another unique aspect of Sperry's contribution to Montana history is the museum they have recently constructed. They call it their shop, but it is way more, and actually a museum is fitting. The building is slightly over 6000sq. ft. in size. It has a display area that will house the antique and restored tractors and related farm implements of 'yesteryear'. It has a store front that replicates early small town tractor dealerships. It has a comfortable conference room that allows a variety of meetings to enjoy. It will be home to the "Tired Iron Club" as well. Memorabilia is nicely displayed on the walls. Yet guests will be able to see it as a working farm shop with tools, welders, work benches and such.

3. Describe the nominee—provide a short biographical sketch/history of the nominee, including” length of involvement in service; effectiveness of service; level of prior recognition; and degree of commitment to the general concepts and highest goals of the historical community. (Limit 500 words)

9 March 2019

**Heritage Keeper Awards Chair
Montana Historical Society
Box 201201 225 North Roberts
Helena, MT 69620-1201**

Letter of support for Heritage Keeper and Heritage Guardian Award for:

Darrel and Carolyn Sperry, 807 Old Corvallis Road, Corvallis, MT 59828

Darrel and Carolyn Sperry have farmed in the Corvallis area for many years and have demonstrated an ability to try innovative farm practices and preserve a wide array of historic tools, machinery and artifacts. They have constructed a large farm shop which will have a display area for tractors and implements, as well as antique tools, some relating back to the early settlers in Montana.

Darrel serves as President of the “Tired Iron Antique Tractor Club”, with members from all over the Bitter Root valley. The club was organized in the early 1990’s and after a number of years of Darrel’s leadership, the club carries out a complete cycle of planting, harvest and old-time threshing at the Ravalli County Fair each year.

Earlier, Plow days were held at Teller Wildlife Refuge, using teams of horses, as well as rebuilt antique tractors, turning over and conditioning the fields with restored implements, some of which were more than a century old. Grain was planted, harvested with binders, and the grain was shocked, then loaded to be pitched into a rebuilt threshing machine, powered by a 1918 steam tractor. The activity became so popular that the club was invited to demonstrate old-time threshing at the Fair. Darrel has led this effort, taking a lot of his own, and his family’s time to plant, irrigate, harvest and assure that there is a good historic display at the Fair.



Darrel and his son, Shane, cutting oats with a binder.

Darrel and his family have preserved many aspects of Montana agriculture which have otherwise been lost, and will now be available for the public to see, long into the future.

Darrel and Carolyn's farming operation relies on irrigation water. Darrel has always been active in the affairs of the Corvallis Canal that brings water out of the Bitter Root River to their farm. The Corvallis Canal has the oldest water right for water out of the Bitter Root River. It was constructed in 1871., The Corvallis Canal was dug, in order to irrigate 5,000 acres of agricultural ground. The canal is owned by share holders who's number of shares depend on the number of acres they own. The Canal board is made up of 5 directors who are appointed through election by shareholders. Darrel became a board member of the Corvallis Canal in 1983. He was an active member continuously, then in 2012 he was elected president. The board of Directors meet once a month to discuss issue and to preserve the water rights of those that use the canal for agricultural purposes. Darrel is a wealth of information concerning water history, water uses, and irrigation practices.

4. Attach Supporting Documentation – i.e. news articles, commendations, letters of support. (Limit – three documents)

Heritage Keeper Awards Chair
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To Whom It May Concern:

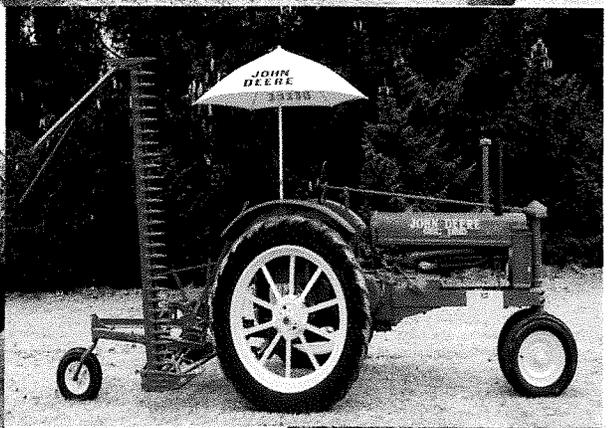
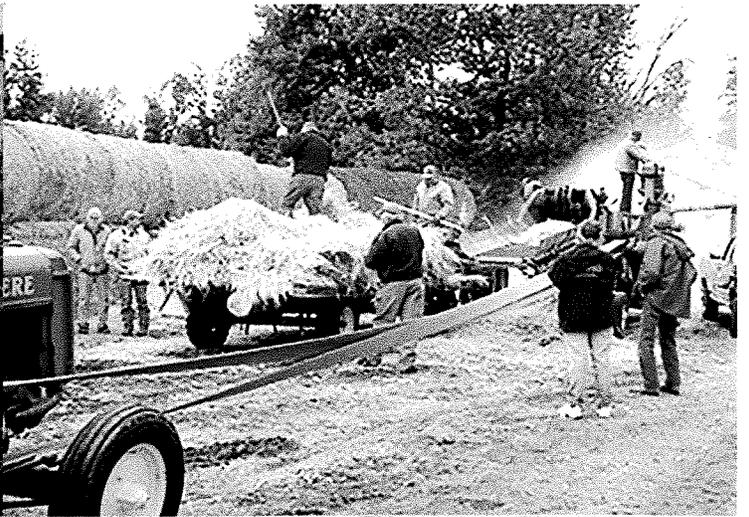
I have been asked to talk about Darrel Sperry and his involvement in the Ravalli County Fair. Darrel is the founder and President of Tired Iron. Darrel formed this club about 20 years ago. He has been involved in Fair with the Tired Iron since 2004.

Darrel saw a need and coupled with his passion for all things historic. At the Fair he and his Club bring together any older Farm Implement you can name plus household antiques from a period of time that would harken back to last century (that would be 1800s) up to early mid-1900s. I cannot stress to you how wonderful their area at Fair has developed over the years. I tend to be very busy at Fair but I always set aside an afternoon to wander and see what they have brought. A good historical presentation takes one back in time, slows you down and allows reflection on all those who have gone before.

Kudos to Darrel, allowing the community to partake in his passion for restoration is educational and amazing. His presentation of that passion at Ravalli County Fair year after year is appreciated. It truly never gets old or "Tired".

Sincerely,

Margaret Yuhas,
Chair Ravalli County Fair Commission



Sperry family rents combine to local farmers during busy harvest season

LAURA LUNDOQUIST

RAVATH REPUBLIC

CORVALLIS – The hulking green machine steadily chewed its way through the field of golden grain, its front paddlewheel bearing hundreds of cutting points that cycled like shark's teeth. The stalks it left behind resembled a giant game of pick-up sticks while its grain bin slowly filled.

After the first short lap around the 20-acre field, the combine trundled over to a waiting truck and regurgitated the barley into the back. Two weeks into November, the mid-afternoon sun was already low, and Shayne Sperry knew he had only about two hours to finish harvesting Glen Moeller's field before night settled in.

"We got about 80 bushels an acre out of Glen's field," said Shayne's father, Darrel, a few days later. "We needed to get it done because we need to get the corn in."

During good weather in the fall, the Sperrys' combine is in constant motion, and not just in their own fields. For several years, Darrel and Shayne have worked the fields around the Bitterroot Valley with a variety of equipment, helping out fellow farmers who couldn't afford the larger machines. It's a win-win situation, because it keeps the Sperrys afloat too.

That's often the way cooperation evolved when farms and ranches were more spread out. Families developed specialties as farmers and ranchers worked together to bring in the harvest, brand the cattle or round up the sheep. One farm invested in the squeeze shoot or the combine while another bought the grain trucks, and they all shared.

The Sperrys are carrying on what remains of that tradition in the Bitterroot Valley. They don't have the only combine, but the competition doesn't bother Darrel. It's not easy to transport a combine, and that's what he'd have to do to cover the valley now that farms are few and far between. So Darrel and Shayne do most of their work around Corvallis where they can just lumber to fields down the road.

"That's the problem with the valley," Darrel said. "All these subdivisions came in, and what little land is left is all chopped up in these little patches. Up north, you can run a combine a half-mile at a whack."

Several Bitterroot farmers grow corn on those little patches. Darrel said he used to harvest more corn, but some farmers have gotten into other things over the years. But farms such as Moeller's and Hul's Dairy still depend on the Sperry's corn planter in the spring and their combine and silage harvester in the fall.

"He stays pretty busy," Moeller said. "Once the corn is ready, he starts hitting the fields. You don't know exactly when he's going to get to yours, but he doesn't like to stop once he gets there."

All that work takes its toll on equipment, so Shayne ended up taking a new combine on its inaugural run on Moeller's barley field.

"Well, it's new to us, but it's 12 years old," Shayne said. "Can't afford new ones. Our old one was a '76, and it just finally wore out. Still, it's only the third in about 40 years – that's not bad."

A new combine – Darrel is a loyal John Deere man – can cost close to \$300,000. A used one can run about half that, but it still isn't cheap.

The Sperrys offset the cost by renting it out, but they weren't always one of the valley's rent-a-combine sources.

Darrel began as a dairyman when he bought his Hawker Lane farm from his uncle in 1972. For the next 14 years, he milked 125 cows three times a day and loved it. He had no desire to do anything different, but desire had no influence after 1984.

"We were selling milk to Safeway, but that's when they pulled out of

Butte, and we lost our milk market," Darrel said. "We sold cheese milk, grade B milk, to Salmon for a few years but we couldn't come out ahead."

After reluctantly selling his cows in a government buyout program, Darrel started looking for ways to reinvent his farm.

When he couldn't afford to buy any more land in the Bitterroot Valley in the 1990s, he bought some near Moiese from his son-in-law. As he became acquainted with some northern farmers, Darrel learned they were doing well raising peppermint.

So even though he still keeps cattle, the Riverbottom Dairy became the Sperry Mint Farm, as Darrel embraced mint oil production.

He bought root-stock planters, a boiler the size of a Volkswagon bus, and special tubs and vats that he used to extract oil from the fragrant plant. Rather than accept a \$25,000 construction bid, he and his family built a special shed for all the equipment and plumbed it all together themselves.

"It would have been a big thing, and it was when we started," Darrel said.

But Darrel and Shayne ended up the victims of U.S. over-production, as farmers across the Northwest jumped in, and cheap imports. China exported cheap oil made of menthol by-products that pushed mint oil out of some manufacturing processes, and for the rest, China's mint oil, often a mixture of peppermint and substandard corn mint, was cheaper.

"We can't produce it for the \$5 a pound that they were delivering it to the dock in California," Shayne said. "Our break-even price was \$15 a pound."

Once again, the Sperrys had to cut their losses and find something else to preserve their livelihood. Darrel may appreciate the old ways – he's just restored a 1938 tractor, John Deere, of course – but never let it be said that he's afraid to try something new.

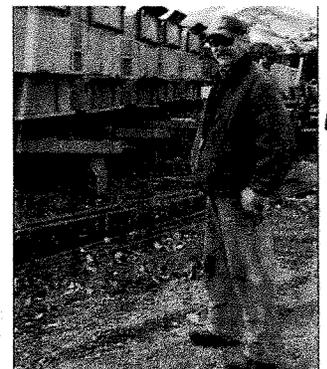
Last year, the Sperrys were one of the first to plant soy beans in the valley, and they are beginning to reap the benefits.

Now, as the mint oil equipment sits abandoned, a new machine hums with hope in a nearby shed. The extractor, shipped from Wisconsin, squeezes oil from soy beans to produce high-protein meal. The Sperrys plan on selling what soy bean meal they don't keep for cattle feed and using the oil for biodiesel to run their many machines.

"That's the plan," Darrel said. "We've had to use 1,000 to 1,200 gallons of diesel in the past six weeks – it's killing us."

But Darrel said they're actually doing pretty good overall, thanks to this year's increase in crop prices. If he can add to his bottom line by reducing his diesel bill, he and Shane might finally stabilize for a while.

"We're still working at figuring out what to do," Darrel said. "But we're still here and that's more than a lot can say."



LAURA LUNDOQUIST - Ravath Republic
Darrel Sperry stands in front of the bins that would have held his mint crop before it was turned into peppermint oil. All his equipment now sits empty because mint oil no longer pays.

Tired Iron Club members work the land the old-fashioned way

DAVID ERICKSON
RAVALLI REPUBLIC

"This is where your oatmeal comes from," says Clark Carpenter, with a grin as he picks a handful of plants from a field south of Corvallis on Saturday.

Actually, the oats he's handling will most likely become horse feed in the valley. Carpenter is just illustrating a point: the food at your breakfast table still requires a lot of manual labor, especially if it is harvested with antique machinery.

Carpenter is a member of the Tired Iron Club, a group that restores antique farm equipment and use it in the field.

On Saturday, they used an old-fashioned binder to harvest a portion of an oat field belonging to Corvallis farmer

Darrel Sperry. The binder is a piece of farm equipment that evolved from the reaper.

"The reaper and the binder are what made farming go from subsistence to the industrial age," explains Carpenter. "That, and the steam and internal combustion engines."

The binder allowed farmers to cut and harvest large swaths of their plots in a single day, transforming agriculture into a mass-production system. The modern version of a binder is now known as a combine swather, according to Carpenter.

Pulled behind a tractor, a reel of wooden boards on the binder sweeps the plants into a row of moving blades. The cut stems then drop neatly onto a can-

vas, where they are swept up, bundled into neat five-pound bushels, and knotted with twine before being dropped onto the ground. The process is amazingly efficient and fast for a machine invented in 1872.

"The blades that cut the oats today with modern equipment are the same type that were used on the original reapers," Carpenter said. "That's how well they work."

Gerald Lemon, another member of the club, helped restore the binder from used parts he bought.

"It was basically just a pile of old junk when I got it," he said.

The binder is actually a fairly complicated piece of equipment, so anyone interested in learning more will be able

to find the members of the Tired Iron Club at the upcoming Ravalli County Fair from Sept. 2-5. They will be demonstrating an old-fashioned thrashing machine on Friday and Saturday.

"The thrasher is what separates the kernel from the straw," Carpenter explains. "Back in the old days, only a few farmers could afford to own a thrasher, so everyone used it. It was a joyous time. Everyone would help everybody else out. If you had a thrasher, you would thrash for your neighbors. If you didn't have one, you would just have to wait your turn. The women would cook some great food, and everyone worked extremely hard."

See **TIED IRON**, Page 10

One gets the sense that Carpenter and his fellow club members are nostalgic about the days when people worked the land with their hands, before subdivisions and industrial mass-scale agriculture made the work of small-scale farmers nearly obsolete.

The field where the club is harvesting oats is picturesque. The crop is owned by Sperry, and both he and Carpenter seem overcome with happiness because they get to spend the day getting

their hands dirty.

Club member Al Simmons is a World War II veteran and has spent almost his whole life in the valley.

"I've been here for 83 years," he says, with barely concealed pride. He moves quickly to pick up the bundles left behind by the binder. As with the other members, he seems at ease with working in the hot sun.

Another member, Richard Staats, will be demonstrating his old-fashioned "hit-and-

miss" engines, which were used on early farm equipment from the late 1800s to the 1930s. He creates the engines from used scrap metal, and said they are a hit at the fair.

"Oh they are crowd stoppers," he says, with a grin. "I will be there at the fair every day."

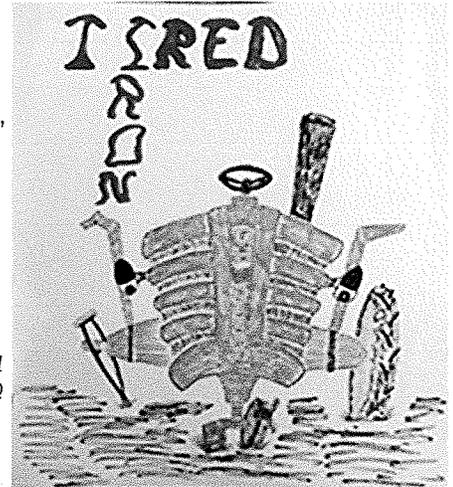
The club members will be located near the rear gates of the fairgrounds on every day of the fair. The thrashing machine promises to be quite a show, according to Carpenter.

"It's going to be great, I have fun doing it every year," he said.

For more information about the Tired Iron Club, call Carpenter at 363-3827.

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Sports Editor David Erickson can be reached at 363-3300 or sports@ravallirepublic.com.



Powerful stuff

Peppermint aroma permeates Corvallis

BY DRAKE KIEWIT

If you live in Corvallis, you know the peppermint harvest began in late August and is almost completed. As the students in the Corvallis district can testify, the aroma of nearby mint fields is powerful stuff.

The Sperry family is just completing their second year of harvesting mint oil from their former alfalfa fields which now support the low growing, water demanding mint plant.

"Mint is an exciting crop and we can get a lot higher return than with hay or grain. Not everyone can grow mint, it needs water early in the spring and late into the fall and you have to have bottom ground. It's not the type of crop you can water a couple of times and then go take a vacation," said Darrel Sperry. He estimated a per-acre cost of \$500 to maintain the crop but expects to harvest 70 pounds of oil per acre this year.

He said the open market price of high quality mint oil varies from \$20 to \$10 a pound but is currently hovering around \$13 a pound. "One ounce of mint oil can flavor 1,000 pounds of chewing gum," said Darrel's son, Shayne. The primary user of Bitterroot Valley mint is the Procter and Gamble company, according to Darrel. "It's used in toothpaste, mouth wash and peppermint schnapps."

The Sperrys already have contracted with A.M. Todd Co. of Kalamazoo, Mich., to sell their estimated 5,200 pounds of mint oil harvested off more than 100 acres of fields near their home in Corvallis.

In the fall of 1989, the Sperrys planted 15 acres of mint after "heavily researching" the crop which is gaining popularity in the Flathead Valley of western Montana.

In the summer of 1990, they set up their mint processing still in Hamilton and figured they harvested 58 pounds-per-acre from

their "baby mint" that first year. Darrel said of the first harvest, "We had no idea about the quality of the oil. We found out that we can grow the best mint oil in the world."

Last fall, the family purchased a mint planter and planted additional mint acreages for themselves as well as two other local farmers.

"We lost 65 acres to winter kill," said Darrel. The frigid weather, which blew into the valley around last Christmas, "freeze dried" the roots of the new crop.

An unexpected accident — contrary to the prevailing advice about planting mint — saved about 35 acres of new plantings in Stevensville. The mint roots are planted in a furrow and appear similar to potatoes when planted. In the case of mint, the hilled furrows should have been rolled to compact the dirt. With the sudden appearance of winter's cold, the furrows weren't rolled and Darrel

said that extra insulation is what saved the crop.

This year, the Sperrys have built a new building to process their mint oil. The new building houses three "condenser" units and a new 350-horsepower boiler which was trucked to their Corvallis farm from Louisiana. Darrel estimates the new facility will be able to process oil from 1,000 acres of ground.

The harvest this year was delayed and started just before the Ravalli County Fair. "Normally we will start around the second week in August. This year we were waiting for the power company to get a gas line installed for the boiler," Darrel explained.

This fall, the plan is to plant some acreage but the family has decided to wait until spring, because of the winter kill, to plant an additional 150 acres of mint. "It's really hard to get certified (disease-free) roots (required by the state)," according to Darrel. "There is only one certified grower in the

country and he's in Idaho. There are two growers trying to get certified in the Kalispell area right now. We're going to plant a little deeper and we're going to cover the new plantings with the mint silage from this year."

The future of mint, exclusively the Black Mitchum variety at this point, is good for the Bitterroot Valley.

