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Border Crossing

The past four years of my life have been a whirlwind of change. As a sophomore in highschool, my proverbial rug of comfort and familiarity was ripped out from under me. Due to my father's line of work and my own pursuit of higher education, I have changed schools four times and moved 2,524 miles from home, and since then I have not felt like I really belong wherever it is that I happen to be. It must be understood that I am extremely grateful for the opportunities I have been given and the places I have gotten to explore, but the fact remains that my stake in my environment feels no more stable than a leaf's perch on the branch of a tree in October. Many aspects of my life will never feel the same, nor should they--but I strongly believe that everyone needs at least one place where they feel unconditionally welcome. This place for me is Plentywood, Montana.



Whenever the weather was at it's hottest and the nation at it's most patriotic, me and my family would be found packed into a sweaty car headed for home. My comfortability in Plentywood could be due to the fact that the streets were the same streets my parents used to run around on and the grass fields were the same grass fields they fell in love on, or maybe it just came from the magical feeling that a summer destination evokes; Whatever the reason, I know that when I am there I am at ease. Nestled safely away in the northeast corner of my home state, Plentywood will remain for me a time capsule that I may unearth whenever I need it... or at least it would have if it was not located four-thousand feet above the largest oil field in North America.

An increase of four hundred people may not hold much relevance in a city, but it certainly registers when the initial population of the area is 1,638. In the past two years, the population of Plentywood has grown to exceed 2,000 people, the most since 1999.¹ This new spike in populus directly correlates with the increased drilling activity of the Bakken oil field. The Bakken oil field is an rock unit that covers over roughly 200,000 square miles of land, underlying parts of Montana, North Dakota and Saskatchewan. Until recently, the ability to use this formation as a drilling site proved to have many technical difficulties. However, with the new technologies of hydraulic fracturing (fracking) and horizontal drilling working together, it is estimated that this oil field could produce close to 7.4 billion barrels of oil. Needless to say, that figure caught the attention of quite a few people. Almost overnight, hundreds of thousands of workers made their way to the area and set up camp.²

¹ "Plentywood, Montana." (MT 59254) profile: population, maps, real estate, averages, homes, statistics. <http://www.city-data.com/city/Plentywood-Montana.html> (accessed April 28, 2014).

² Grunewald, Rob. "Bakken Stands Out in Comparison With Other Shale Drilling Areas." *Fedgazette* (Minneapolis), January 20, 2014.

Although there has only been a small increase in the actual population of Plentywood relative to the amount of workers required to drill this massive formation, the majority of workers in the area can be found in “man camps” around the drill sites and farmland throughout Sheridan county. The same pastures that I used to sit and watch dance with the wind were now overrun by metal on wheels; Mobile homes as far as the eye can see.



The presence of these workers has not only impose an eyesore to the people of Sheridan county, but also a threat. The search for oil has always brought with it a large number of workers and these workers have always had a large impact on the communities the surround, for the better of worse. Butte, Montana, for example, is a town that came to be solely for the purpose of mining and drilling for coal. It started as a small camp and became a boomtown within months of the first mine being opened.³ For Butte, the presence of industry obviously has a good influence on the civilians in the area, but that was because it came at such an early stage of it's creation. Plentywood is a small, American town that has become accustomed and

³ Hoffman, Larry . "Butte Montana Mining History." Butte Montana Mining History.
<http://www.mininghistoryassociation.org/ButteHistory.htm> (accessed April 28, 2014).

comfortable with its size and the lifestyle that comes with it. It is unfair to the residents of Plentywood, the majority of whom being farmers over the age of forty, to introduce such a drastic and sudden shift in lifestyle and population. A recent article from the Missoula, MT based newspaper *The Missoulian* states:

Drug crimes in eastern Montana have more than doubled. Assaults in Dickinson, N.D., have increased fivefold in just two years. And the once-sleepy town of Plentywood has seen three assaults with weapons in the past few months – a prospect previously unheard of in the tiny community tucked against the Canada border. ⁴

Having spoken to my grandfathers on both sides of the family and many other locals of Plentywood, it is easy to determine that the general consensus regarding the newcomers is not a welcoming one, to say the least. During my last unfortunate trip to the town, I was actually present during a frightening interaction between two drunk patrons of the local “Blue Moon” tavern that involved a pistol and the police. My grandparent’s disdain for the workers of the Bakken oil field is completely justified, in my eyes, but there is one small, contradicting detail I have failed to mention thus far: They have both leased out their farmland to begin drilling as soon as possible.

On a moral level and nostalgic level, I am completely against the practice of hydraulic fracturing. There are way too many cases of polluted drinking water and health problems associated with fracking for me to feel comfortable with my heartland succumbing to this industry of greed. However, with this one crossing of borders also came another: growing up.

⁴ Brown, Matthew. "Crime booms in Montana, Dakota oil fields." *Missoulian (Missoula)*, April 24, 2012. http://missoulian.com/news/state-and-regional/crime-booms-in-montana-dakota-oil-fields/article_e15bd0d2-8d40-11e1-915d-0019bb2963f4.html (accessed April 20, 2014).

There are situations like this in everyone's life that must be looked at through a mature and rational lens in order to truly understand them. I desperately wanted to disagree with the idea that leasing out family land in the hopes of striking it rich is reasonable, but then I shut up and looked at the situation from another point of view. My grandparents on both sides have worked so damn hard their entire lives in the hot sun, raising nine kids in total and putting them through school that maybe they deserve to finally sit back and let the work be done for them. For two years now they have been receiving monthly checks with the hopes of striking it big, and I cannot blame them. Who wouldn't take happy retirement over a few morals anyway?

There is quite a lot I have learned about the crossing of borders through the writing and evaluation of the recent change in my nostalgic summer destination, but most importantly, I came to a comforting resolution: There are hundreds of borders that we must cross in our lifetime, whether they be physical or mental, but we must travel with an open mind. Although I don't believe it to be selfish of me to want Plentywood to remain unchanged as my life becomes more complicated, I know that I have to be adaptable and look at the situation from other points of view. The presence of workers and industry in Plentywood, Montana may not be aesthetically appealing, but it is helping the lives and financial situations of many of its residents, and I cannot feel justified for wanting them to give that up for my own personal reasons. The crossing of any border will likely bring with it questions and complications, often resulting in the need to cross more borders, but the only way not to get stuck at border patrol is to travel with an open mind and an ability to adapt.

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