

Hope in the Clouds

Contributed by Lorna Thackeray of the Gazette staff

Billings Gazette
March 18, 2001

Desperate farmers, ranchers seek help from rainmaker

As far as Viola Hill is concerned, it comes down to this: Keep praying for rain that doesn't come, or hire a rainmaker and try to save the family ranch.

"They said, well, we should pray," she said in an interview from her home in Roundup. "Well, we have prayed and our prayers aren't being answered";

She and her neighbors in Musselshell and Petroleum counties have been waiting for decent moisture since 1993, the last time she can remember the family ranch halfway between Musselshell and Winnett covered with thick, green grass.

It's been downhill since.

"Drought, drought, grasshoppers, drought," she lamented. "If we go through another summer like last summer, we're going to be out of business.";

Viola Hill remembers the misery of the 1930s and believes the last eight years have been worse. If it continues much longer, there will be no one left in the heart of Montana's farm and ranch country still in business, Hill said. "We just can't sit and hold our hands and say we're going to pray," she said. "It's got to the point, you've got to do something. We just can't take any chances.";

That's what drove her to the rainmaker — Matt Ryan, a 48-year-old man from Mount Shasta, California, who many in northeastern Montana believe spared their corner of the state from drought that shriveled and burned the rest of Montana last summer. Most of the region around Glasgow saw an unexpected, and quite exceptional, 3 to 4 inches above average moisture in 2000.

Hill tracked down Ryan late last month in Shelby, where other despairing northern Montana ranchers had put together \$13,000 to bring Ryan to wrest the atmosphere into normal moisture patterns.

"We've been in a severe drought since 1985," said rancher Gary Gollehon of Brady, who sent for Ryan. "The only year we've had decent moisture since was in 1993.";

"I guess I'm basically doing this out of desperation," he said. There are wells, springs, reservoirs and streams up here that nobody can remember being dry before. "I've got grandkids who want to continue farming and ranching, but they can't, if it's continuous drought.";

Gollehon expected to hear skeptics joking about his decision to bring the rainmaker, but nobody has said a thing, at least not to his face, and many have chipped in to help cover the cost.

Hill said the same is true in Petroleum County, where she had no trouble raising the \$10,000 that Ryan asks for his services. They've already tried everything else.

Ryan has been in Montana this time for about 30 days working day and night. Although Weather Service reports and snowpack totals don't reflect large improvements in moisture levels across the state, Hill and Gollehon say they can see and feel the changes.

"We've got quite a bit of moisture out on the ranch," Hill said, adding that most of the surrounding county did too. Gollehon also reported snow in his area, Tuesday — not a lot, but bigger, moister flakes that didn't evaporate right away.

Ryan said the situation across eastern Montana and out on the Great Plains was worse than he expected and will take a lot of adjusting — but he's confident that the rains will return.

"This whole wide area has been dry and droughty for at least the last ten years, in some areas even longer," Ryan said. "So it's going to take a little work and you won't see it change overnight. Still, all the signs I'm looking for are coming up," he said. "I don't see any reason why we can't get this turned around . . . we should at least see average precipitation for the rest of March and

April.”

Gollehon said that Ryan warned him before deciding to make the trip to Montana, that February was not the best time to come. January and February are among the driest months in this part of the country, while May and June are the wettest.

“When you’re trying to turn around a chronic drought, it’s a lot easier to get a good response in the rainy season,” Ryan said.

Still, he noted clouds on the Great Plains are building and staying around longer and daily humidity levels are up.

But when he arrived, Ryan said, he found the state so desiccated and the atmosphere so stale, he knew it was time to get things rolling. His goal, he said, was to begin the restoration of normal pulses of moisture through the drought area and keep them coming through spring. Then he’ll be back in May, he said, to make sure they continue through the growing season. In the meantime, he’s training an apprentice in Montana to carry on while he’s working in other sites across the Northwest.

Ryan actually doesn’t claim to make rain.

“God makes the rain,” he says with a laugh. “But let’s say I know how to help out.”

Ryan uses 10-foot long steel pipes to make connections with water on the ground and moisture in the atmosphere to nudge atmospheric energies back into balance. It took him 18 years to learn the exacting manipulations necessary to restore the natural stream of moisture, he said.

For about the last week and a-half, he’s been working north of Winnett. Then, he was back in the Great Falls area for a few days before heading toward the West Coast.

Doubters still abound, but support in Montana’s distressed farming communities this year has been “tremendous,” he said.

“One thing a drought does to people is cause them to stretch out a lot further than they ever did before,” he said. “Take Viola . . . she says she tried praying for rain and “nothing happened.” So she reaches out and finds me, a rainmaker. Could be that’s God’s answer, see?”

“And then in Roundup the other night, there were 80 people or more at a meeting in the Roundup High School listening to a “rainmaker” — a lot those people were hard-bitten ranchers that were stretching way out just to be there. It was good to see them starting to open up a bit. That part has been really gratifying.”