Arid Towns Turning to ‘Rainmaker’

Contributed by Carol Bradley, Tribune staff writer

Great Falls Tribune
March 20, 2001

Ordinarily when he gazes up at the sky, Matt Ryan says, he can see five or six different sections pulsing with energy in a cornucopia of colors and shades.

But Eastern Montana is so bone-dry that when Ryan arrived in Roundup a week and a half ago, the sky held no color at all, he said. It looked to him like one big muslin sheet.

Of course, that’s the reason Ryan was summoned to Roundup in the first place – he’s called “the rainmaker,” which is the equivalent of a miracle worker in this parched region of the state.

Farmers and ranchers worried sick about the drought hired him, hoping against hope he could quench some of the thirst.

Lo and behold, nearly a week after Ryan went to work, snow and rain did fall on her ranch and the surrounding county, Viola Hill reported.

“It was pretty wet snow,” Hill added in a telephone interview the following day, “because it’s real muddy out here right now.”

They used to hang rainmakers back in homesteading days, Ryan is fond of saying, and now and again the locals still treat him as if he were Elmer Gantry, the fictional charlatan who smooth-talked innocent folks out of their money.
But in the sprawling countryside surrounding Glasgow , Roundup and now a stretch of northcentral Montana from Brady to Shelby, wheat farmers and cattle ranchers are abandoning their skepticism and welcoming Ryan with open arms.

“I have yet to have anybody come up and tell me I’m a total idiot for hiring him,” said Gary Gollehon, who raises malt barley east of Brady.

“If somebody has another idea, I’m willing to listen to it, but I don’t want to go through another summer of drought.”

Ever since Austrian scientist Wilhelm Reich claimed to have discovered “orgone energy” at his research lab in Rangley , Maine in the 1930s, so-called rainmakers have used hollow metal tubes to purportedly trigger movements of energy in the atmosphere.

The federal government didn’t take kindly to Reich’s claims. Federal agents raided his lab, destroyed his instruments and sentenced him to two years in prison. He died, some say mysteriously, a week before he was supposed to be released.

Today, the federal government is largely silent on the issue of Reich’s work, called orgonomy.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration researched weather modifiers from the 1970s to the early 1990s and concluded that it’s impossible to determine whether an individual caused a weather occurrence or if it simply happened naturally, spokeswoman for NOAA research, Jana Goldman, said Monday.

When asked of this, Ryan replied, “It’s actually quite easy to test whether someone has changed the weather, or not . . . you just don’t limit your experiment to one occurrence. I’m continually surprised at NOAA and the NWS’s statements about rainmaking. Either they are very dull scientists, or their very closed-minded.”

A spokeswoman for the American Meteorological society said that organization focuses on scientific means of predicting the weather, not changing it.

“That’s not to say there other things out there aren’t happening,” the spokeswoman, Stephanie Kenitzer, said. “But that’s not what the AMS is concerned with.”

A 48-year-od native of Albany , N.Y. , Ryan says he came out West to study under Sun Bear, an Ojibwa medicine man who is said to have been taught by his uncles how to make rain.

Ryan also studied simultaneously under Jerome Eden, a natural scientist and scholar of Wilhelm Reich’s work

who was also the author of several books.

Luring the Rain

Ryan, who now lives in Mount Shasta , California , insists that what he does is science-based, with dollops of spirituality mixed in.

“Fifty-percent of what I do is involved in what you might call prayer, there is an intention to it,” he said.

He operates on the belief that a force in nature exists that transcends weather and causes all things to move, what Reich called orgone energy. Regions of the country plagued by drought have lost much of this energy movement, it’s gone stagnant, he maintains.

Ryan’s job is to lure it back, to refresh it again.

But there’s another side, too. “As you acknowledge the weather, the weather tends to acknowledge you back,” he tells the people he works with. Because of his positive attitude and relationship, “rain will usually find me, and if I need a sunny time, I get that too.”

Ryan blames the hundred nuclear missile silos surrounding Great Falls with creating all kinds of stagnant energy. “You can trace the origins of your long-term drought up here right back to the installation of those silos in the late 70s. That’s the last time, with a few exceptions, that you’ve seen good moisture years up here.”

Using Antenna

His methodology is similar to sitting in a silent room and then suddenly turning on a radio, Ryan said. “What do you have? Fifty, Sixty stations coming in,” he said.

Out in the field, he sets a series of hollow metal pipes on an apparatus and grounds them into a river, creek or other source of water and aims the pipes in the direction he believes dormant energy lies. In the same way antennas pick up radio signals, the pipes home in on moisture.

Ryan warns against trying his technique at home. A neophyte could wind up exacerbating the drought instead of relieving it, and there are also health consequences to the operator.

In the hands of an expert, however, cloudbusting can work wonders, Ryan claims.

“We starting to see moisture all over the state,” he told the Tribune. “The drought tendency is starting to lessen.”

As far as his own approach to nature, Ryan said, “I don’t treat the earth as if it were a dead thing or just a backdrop to my activities. I treat her as if she were as alive as me, just differently.”

Repeat Customers

It turns out that a group of Glasgow-area farmers has been paying Ryan for his services for almost 10 years. He did his rainmaking work in northeast Montana in 1992, ’93, ’98, and 2,000.

“Until you know him, you might think he’s a little bit of a crackpot,” acknowledged Phyllis Furhman, a wheat farmer who coordinates Ryan’s visits.

And yes, skeptics abound, she said.

“He’ll come up here in a drought and get them the most beautiful crop they ever raised and they’ll say, ‘Well, it would have rained anyway.’”

But the 30 or so farmers and ranchers who now finance his expeditions “have the utmost faith in this man,” Fuhrman said. “We have seen this man work in many different years now, and always, always he only comes here when there’s drought. The $10,000 is chickenfeed for the crop he brought in to northeastern Montana last summer.”

Ten thousand dollars is the going rate to hire Ryan. There is not necessarily any money-back guarantee.

“So far, I’ve never missed. But I can guarantee that when I come into an area, the people are going to learn something, Ryan said. “What usually happens weatherwise is for the month or so following my work, a

region will see above-average precipitation regardless of what’s been going on before. That’s a pretty incredible claim given that I don’t get called into areas unless there’s a severe drought.”

Rain, he promised

Last year, Ryan arrived in the Glasgow area on June 2 in the midst of a drought as severe as anywhere else in the state. He stayed until June 10th and told the group up in that region they should expect to get rain through the middle of July, according to Fuhrman.

Just as Ryan promised, the rain fell – 6.38 inches between June and July 15, more than twice the 2.2 inches that would fall normally during that period according to the National Weather Service.

“He’s got us rain every time,” Fuhrman said.

Gollehon, the Brady farmer, contacted Ryan after hearing of his work around the Glasgow and listening to him on the radio talk show “Berg in the Morning.” Ryan finally agreed to come to Brady even though it was a little early in the season to suit his tastes.

Normally, Ryan said, he likes to come in the spring, pitch his tent and sleep near his equipment. The pipes give him flu-like symptoms and cause his hands and feet to swell, he said. Sleeping on the ground enables the earth to absorb the negative energy out of his body, he said.

About 250 area farmers attended a meeting at the Brady high school in February, and at least 50 chipped in the $13,000 necessary to procure Ryan’s services, Gollehon said.

Holy Toledo : snow!

A month later, he remains a believer.

“Matt always says, ‘God makes the rain and snow,’ and I’ll agree with him 100 percent there,” Gollehon said. “But we had a wet snow last night and the night before that. These flakes were a quarter to fifty cent size, and we haven’t seen that kind of snow in years. This morning the trees were still filled with snow.”

That Great Falls experienced a similar snowfall didn’t surprise him, Ryan said. He said his work normally affects entire regions.

“The drought up here in eastern Montana is at least 10 years old in a large area, so we have to work slowly and gently in small areas to loosen things up before we’ll get a big response. When we first got here the snowflakes were like dandruff and there wasn’t a teaspoon of water in a gallon of them. But now they’re getting bigger and fatter and starting to stick to the trees and the sides of barns. It’s starting to look like real snow again. Yeah, it’s starting to turn . . .”