

I think times are going to be better and every thing will  
turn out right in the end and then we will be back  
where we can at least see you all once in a while and  
enjoy a little of life. For such a thing we haven't  
had much of in the past, we have been too busy  
trying to accumulate wealth and the best part of our  
lives is slipping by. When you have death look  
in the face a couple of times it rather makes  
you think that a small thing, wealth is compared

From Dennis Gorman letter  
to "Brother, Sister, and  
Niece," December 21, 1919

Indiana natives Maggie and Dennis Davis,  
who homesteaded northeast of Great Falls,  
Montana, left a moving account of their  
sixteen-year farming effort in letters sent home  
to their families in Burnettsville. Pictured are  
the Davises and their horses.

*'Well I have lived in Montana  
almost a week and like it fine'*

**Letters from the Davis Homestead, 1910-1926**

by Seena B. Kohl



**I**n a June 1924 letter, written just at the time when farming conditions on the Montana High Line were improving, Maggie Gorman Davis despaired:

We haven't any plans. It isn't any use to plan. We hate it here. We never know when we will have a total failure again and be caught with a lot of stock. We were getting pretty nervous when this rain came.

This letter is one of more than forty written by Maggie Gorman Davis and her husband Dennis Davis to their family in Indiana between 1910 and 1926 from the Davis homestead near Carter, Montana.<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, Dennis and Maggie Davis were representative of midwestern homesteaders who claimed land in Montana during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Like other Montana homesteaders, they were both young, only twenty-three and twenty-five when they took up a claim just as the state's twentieth-century homesteading boom was beginning.<sup>2</sup> Both were hardworking, experienced farmers with good educations.<sup>3</sup> Neither, however, saw

homesteading as anything but a means of acquiring money to purchase a farm in Indiana.

The Davis's letters are those of "leavers"—homesteaders who gave up their attempt to farm, and they reflect homesteaders' all-too-common experience of unbridled hope diminished by weather, loneliness, family pressures, and unending hard work. Statistics enumerate that the majority of homesteaders failed, but rarely have the voices of leavers been heard other than mitigated through the glow of memory.<sup>4</sup> Detailing the day-to-day impact of drought, windstorms, cold, hail, grasshoppers, and cutworms, the Davis letters' immediacy contrasts with the almost formulaic memoirs of settlement found in community histories, where writers balance bad times with good times and good friends soften hardships.<sup>5</sup>

Leavers have been considered victims or dupes enticed by railroad propaganda, speculators out to make a buck, or incompetents without experience or knowledge of farming. And just as K. Ross Toole refuted these characterizations so, too, does the particular case of Maggie and Dennis Davis.<sup>6</sup>



Unless otherwise noted, photographs and illustrations provided by niece Rosemary Gorman Litke and great-nieces Cynthia McQuinn, Angela Litke, and Rosetta Rider.



When Maggie Gorman Davis stepped off the train in Carter, Montana, in early June 1910, it must have looked much as it does in this photograph of the town taken two months earlier. As the crow flies, the Davis homestead was approximately fifteen miles northwest of Carter.

Courtesy Jack Castor

**A** favored oldest child, Maggie was the first to marry and leave for what was for her an unknown land filled with promise and uncertainty. One can well imagine her family's hunger for news. Many of her letters—which were rediscovered in 1977 after the death of Mae Gorman Johnson (Maggie's younger sister and one of the recipients of the letters)—contain exchanges about topics common to most families: marriages, births, illnesses, fashion, and, of course, work.

The letters also reveal Maggie and Dennis's close and affectionate relationship. In an intriguing letter from May 1912, Maggie wrote about a woman named Davison who had had a baby: "Some people out in the country got us mixed and thought I was the one. I am so glad that my man thinks so much of me and don't want me to raise babies."<sup>7</sup> And, in one of his few surviving letters, Dennis Davis wrote in 1910 with evident pride:

Maggie is writing to you people but I know she won't tell you all so I will tell you myself. . . . She always told me she couldn't bake bread or keep house or set hens and I supposed she could not but she has been making fine bread and pancakes. . . . I don't see how I could prove up this claim without her. In fact she puts the life in all of us and keeps up our courage.

This regard and concern for one another appears throughout the letters.

Dennis and Maggie married March 26, 1910, in Burnettsville, Indiana. Eight months earlier, Dennis and his three brothers—Ray Charles, Arthur Marco "Mark," and Albert Eugene—had traveled to Montana. The brothers each filed for a half section on adjoining land fifteen miles north of the newly established town of Carter, two miles north of the Teton River, and they returned to Indiana in December. Other members of

1. The letters from the Davises, from which the excerpts in this article were taken, were transcribed and compiled by Maggie's niece, Eva Gorman Finnell, and privately published as *The Montana Years Chouteau County, 1910-1926* (Owensboro, Ky., 1980). A copy can be found in the Montana Historical Society Library, Helena. It is impossible to know if the lapses between letters (there is only one letter for some years and none for others) reflect the absence of correspondence, illegible or lost letters, or editorial decisions.

2. K. Ross Toole noted that youth was homesteaders' one common denominator. K. Ross Toole, *Twentieth Century Montana: A State of Extremes* (Norman, 1972), 187.

3. After graduation from high school in Monticello, Indiana, in 1906, Maggie attended Indiana State Normal College for Teachers at Terre Haute and returned to the Burnettsville area to teach. There is no record of Dennis's formal education other than his school atten-

dance in Cass County, Indiana, but he was an experienced farmer. The four letters written by Dennis in *The Montana Years* show that he was a literate and thoughtful man.

4. Between 1919 and 1925, half of Montana farmers, who farmed about 20 percent of the state's land, lost their farms. The Davis's neighbor Jack Castor estimated that 80 percent of Carter-area farms failed. Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries* (Seattle, 1991), 283; Jack K. Castor, *Carter, Montana Homestead Boomtown 1909-1930's* (n.p., 1991), 6.

5. Seena B. Kohl, "Memories of Homesteading and the Process of Retrospection," *Oral History Review*, 17 (Fall 1989), 25-45. For a discussion of the use of community history books, see John W. Bennett and Seena B. Kohl, *Settling the Canadian-American West* (Lincoln, 1995), chap. 1.



In contrast to many settlers who lived in tents or stayed with other families until their homes could be built, Maggie arrived to a three-room house constructed by Dennis (center) and his brothers. At right Maggie poses at the reins in front of the Davis home, and below is her high school portrait.



the Davis family, Dennis's mother Sarah Hitchens Davis, her daughter Roxanna, and Roxanna's husband William Frank Criswell took up homesteads near Dennis and Maggie in 1917.<sup>8</sup> Of all these homesteaders, only Mark Davis farmed his parcel until retirement.<sup>9</sup>

The Davis brothers were among the first to file for homesteads in northern Montana under the provisions of the 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act, which increased the size of claims from 160 acres to 320 acres. In 1912 Congress passed the Three-Year Homestead Act allowing homesteaders to prove up in three years instead of five and to live off the claim for five months of the year. These measures and railroad promotional campaigns advertising the fertility of the northern plains and the success of dry-farming techniques brought a rush of land seekers to the state. In December 1910 the *Great Falls Leader* remarked on the rapidity of settle-

ment, noting that in the Great Falls land office "Since January 1, 1908, there have been over 22,000 filings or a rate of 7,000 per year, whereas eight filings in a day would be considered a land rush in most Land offices."<sup>10</sup>

Eager to begin farming, Dennis and his brothers returned to Montana shortly after the wedding, and Maggie followed in June 1910. The heedless optimism that characterized the initial period of Montana's twentieth-century homesteading was in the air. New settlers came with great hopes recalled Agnes Diefenbaugh:

After a trip through the Eastern states in the fall of 1909, my dad and mother, Mr. and Mrs. L. M. Fishbaugh, decided to see what the West was like. They liked what they saw, came home full of ideas for young folks in the West; all that land just for the taking, raise wheat and live like kings, no thought of rainfall, weather or distance.<sup>11</sup>

Dennis and Maggie Davis shared that sense of limitless opportunity.

Maggie's first letter home on June 4, 1910, recounted her train trip from Indiana to Chicago, then along the Mississippi River and across the northern plains. She

6. Toole, *Twentieth Century Montana*, 27-30.

7. Apparently Maggie and Dennis believed in some form of family planning. There is ample evidence in the letters that Maggie and Dennis enjoyed being with children, and some of their reluctance to have children of their own perhaps stemmed from mixed messages from the family. In September 1917 Maggie's brother Ted wrote, "I guess they had not intended for me to read it, but Mama accidentally mentioned you, and papa said something about the prospective visit of the stork, and so I had to know all, then. . . . As to your mention of the Stork, I can not say that I am overjoyed over it for I thot [*sic*] that you would be the *one* in the Gorman family to refrain from such occupation but then thats your business." We do not know if Maggie returned to Burnettsville at the end of November 1917 to recuperate after a miscarriage or if she miscarried in Indiana.

8. Family or kin group settlement enabled sharing of resources and was an important feature of homestead settlement. Bennett and Kohl, *Settling the Canadian-American West*, 242.

9. Ray Davis left for Washington in 1921, and four years later Albert Davis moved to California and later Washington. Roxanna Davis Criswell and Frank Criswell remained in Montana, first renting their land then selling it to a neighbor who continues to farm it today. Mark Davis farmed his 320 acres until he retired. It is unclear why he stayed; perhaps as a bachelor he was content with a minimal standard of living or perhaps he saw no other place to go. The Davis family had sold their Indiana farm when they moved west.

10. *Great Falls (Mont.) Leader*, December 14, 1910. For a synopsis of the homesteading boom, see Malone, Roeder, and Lang, *Montana*, 281-83, 280-85.

11. Agnes Diefenbaugh reminiscence, in *Paths of the Past on Teton Bench*, comp. Ruby Allen Craig (Great Falls, Mont., [1956?]), 1.





In her letters Maggie described domestic chores, including raising chickens and sewing. At right, with scissors, pattern, and fabric at hand, she paused long enough to have her picture made inside her Montana home.



arrived in Havre and stayed overnight before departing for Carter. The letter described the fellow homesteaders she met on the train, the help of the conductor, food eaten, and her views about Chicago. Omitted was any indication of her feelings about leaving, any apprehension or excitement about homesteading, or, other than not sleeping, how she withstood the trip. Unlike many retrospective accounts that emphasize the space and the open miles of grass, Maggie wrote one brief comment about the landscape, the same landscape in which she would live for the next fifteen years:

Of all the land I saw I liked the land of N. Dak. and East Mont. least of all. It is just hills and hollows and sage brushes. Through Montana the railroad goes between two ranges of foot hills. Someplaces the hills are far enough apart for a good many farms. Some few of the houses were the cheapest looking shacks that could be built, a few were box cars, about one third were good frame houses but the most of them were made of logs, good ones, too.

12. Eva Gorman Finnell, introduction to *The Montana Years Cheuteau County*, 1.

13. See, for example, Clyde Sullivan reminiscence, in Craig, comp., *Paths of the Past*, 50; and Fred Iddings reminiscence, in Pleasant

In contrast with many settlers who lived in tents or stayed with another family until some sort of dwelling could be built, Maggie arrived to a three-room house constructed by Dennis and his brothers. Her first letter from the homestead began, "Well I have lived in Montana almost a week and like it fine." Dennis had met her in Carter, and after a two-hour ride, they arrived at the homestead, where Ray and Albert Davis were making dinner.

They had just got the house finished and moved in the day before. I guess they hustled some to get fixed up before I got there. . . . You would never have thought by the way things were straightened up that boys had done it. They had the pictures hung and the clock up and nails for everything in the kitchen and everything in its place too.

Maggie's letter nine days later was filled with questions about family events and described their activities in Montana. Both Albert and Dennis were working for wages, Albert for a rancher and Dennis hauling coal for a steam-plow outfit. She loaned a neighbor eggs for his hens to set with an agreement to share the hatchlings. She also gave an account of the surrounding countryside:

There are houses all around us. Coming in from the river one night I counted over forty. . . . I think that story we read was a pretty true picture of Montana life. The boys say that all the people they have met who are coming in are nice but the people who already lived here are the ones to look out for. There are several big ranchmen near here. Some are friendly and some of them went to Fort Benton and tried to get the merchants to promise not to sell to the dryland farmers as they call them.

Judging from her letters, neighbors' visits were rare, and Maggie seldom commented on other homesteaders. Without exception, she did not name neighbors unless they were already known by her family. In October she wrote that she planned to "exchange books with a girl this winter," and she told of joining Dennis in hauling water from the Teton River and visiting with a man's wife while Dennis conducted some business a few days after Dennis's twenty-sixth birthday.

Valley Home Demonstration Club, comp., *Footprints through the Valley* (Fort Benton, Mont., 1956), 11.

14. See Mrs. Thurlow Brown reminiscence, in Craig, comp., *Paths of the Past*, 4.

What can one make about the absence of names? Perhaps Maggie felt that there was no reason to name people her family would not know, but from the tone of her letters it seems more likely that she did not see neighbors as an integral part of her life. Her social network remained in Indiana. About two months after her arrival, Maggie wrote to one of her sisters: "We don't have lots of company but we have some. The women met with their sewing every Thursday. But I don't like to go. Dennis made me go once." Although she never explained her dislike, Maggie, according to family accounts, was never interested in or skilled at sewing or cooking.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, her behavior was a far cry from that of other homesteaders, who in reminiscences and local history books commonly placed great importance on the camaraderie and social support of neighbors.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, Maggie's letters reflected little interest in social life and community activities. With the exception of family friends and relatives, her relationships were always in the context of accessing scarce resources, for example, her July 11, 1911, account of berry picking:

I put up 29 quarts, all the empty cans I had and about 20 glasses of jelly. . . . I was berrying five times. Dennis and I went once last Sunday a week and I got so many I got a girl to go with me. We walked once but the next day we rode Prince and Frank. . . . Last Sunday Dennis and Albert both went with me and Monday morning early two women came and we both went with them. There are so many rattlesnakes it isn't very safe for a woman to go alone.

In the same letter, she wrote that "a woman" had given her a dress pattern and that she spent two afternoons and walked two miles to use a sewing machine. Much of this long letter (which included a diagram of her house and placement of furniture) was a response to events in Indiana. After writing that she would

Maggie described the interior of the Davis house to her parents in a letter dated July 11, 1911, reproduced at right from the typescript published by her niece Eva Gorman Finnell in *The Montana Years Chouteau County* (1980). Eva was the daughter of Maggie's brother Ted.


like her parents to visit, she added: "I like it a lot better than last summer. I don't like some of the people and some of their ways. But there are some very good people."

Festivities on the homestead frontier, for the most part, consisted of visiting, dancing, card playing, baseball games, and picnicking. None of these called for spending money and all included the entire family. "We had lots of good times, socially, and otherwise," one homesteader remembered. "About every Saturday night, we would go to some ones house and they would move most of the furniture out, and we would dance and eat till daylight."<sup>14</sup>

Dancing for Maggie and Dennis was precluded by their affiliation with the Christian Church. Dennis had been raised as a Baptist, and although he did not dance, he did play cards. Maggie was raised in the Christian Church in Burnettsville, which her parents had helped found. At the time, both religious groups proscribed dancing, drinking alcohol, and card playing. In February 1911 Dennis wrote about going to a "neighborhood party, (or dance rather)" where his new pair of shoes bruised his foot. He added that he did not think they would attend any more of these. This small note must have created some consternation back in Indiana, since the Gormans adamantly opposed dancing. Maggie's letter less than a month later made it clear that they did not dance.

Dennis had on a new pair [of shoes] that he had just put on and had walked several miles and it was

I got my house cleaned a week ago yesterday. We cleaned it all one day. We had to move in twice before we were ready because it rained. I didn't try to have flowers out of doors because of the chickens but have some in cans. Here is how my house looks.



- 1 bed
- 2 trunk
- 3 two shelves and books under the lower one for clothes.
- 4 cabinet
- 5 stove
- 6 table
- 7 cot
- 8 book case
- 9 table with flowers
- 10 stand
- 11 diploma
- 12 oval picture
- 13 fruit picture
- 14 shelf clock
- 15 big picture
- 16 shelf with fancy cup mugs etc.

That isn't very good but its our home anyway. Dennis writes a letter all right but always forgets to sign his name. I told him if he didn't I wouldn't get up at 4 oclock so he signed it Dad and I have to explain. I always like the name of Dad and as papa wouldn't hear to it I had to do next best and call my man that. He calls me "Ma".  
Well I must close and go to bed  
Write soon  
Maggie.

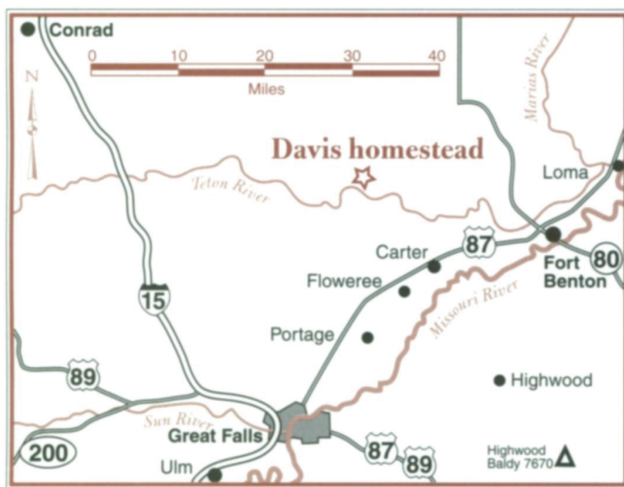


half past four when we got home. It was wearing the shoe so long I think that bruised the toe. Not quite everybody goes [to the dances].

While her letters do mention visits with people she had known in Indiana and with family members, Maggie wrote that she rarely went anywhere. In July 1915 she thanked her mother for a new dress but added:

Don't try to make any more for me as it is hard enough to fit me when I can try them on. I never go any place any way to wear such pretty clothes. Dennis scolds me all the time because I don't go more with him. But I tell him I get it honest.

Without participating in the major diversions of the Carter area, the couple found their social support network quite constricted. Maggie wrote, albeit in 1924 during the low point of their stay in Montana and after they decided to return to Indiana, that Dennis, after reading the Burnettsville newspapers her brother Ted had sent, remarked that there was "a lot doing there [in Burnettsville]."



Map shows modern roads and highways.

Here there is nothing but an occasional dance and card party. Play cards till midnight and dance until morning. As we don't do either it isn't much inducement to go 12 miles through storm and mud to watch somebody else.<sup>15</sup>

Letters from 1910 to 1912, the Davis's first years on their homestead, reported big changes in their vicinity and in the town of Carter. Not quite two months after her arrival in 1910, Maggie remarked, "Carter is getting to be quite a place."

They have two stores now and a graveyard started. . . . You wouldn't believe in the changes that have been made this summer. When Dennis came and even yet when I came, when we wanted to go to town we went towards the highest mountain in the Highwood and when we started home we came towards the middle one of the three "knees" in the north. Now we can't cut across country. We have to follow the road for it is nearly all fenced up.

The town's newspaper, the *Carter Herald*, in 1912 headlined the area's growth in its first edition.<sup>16</sup> Two years after Maggie's arrival, Carter boasted three general stores, two lumberyards, a hotel, restaurant, blacksmith shop, pool hall, barbershop, livery and feed barn, saloon, real estate office, meat shop, post office, telephone office, and a schoolhouse with four teachers, one of whom was Maggie. There was an organized Presbyterian congregation, and several other denominations held services in homes or the schoolhouse.

While Maggie taught in the Carter school in 1911, the couple lived in Carter during the school year, where they had leased a lot and built a small house. Their

When times were lean, Maggie taught in the Carter school (right) or in Ulm, south of Great Falls.



Harvest season has always been a period of uncertainty in Montana. Maggie commented on the back of the photograph at right that seventy-five acres had yielded 1,600 bushels of spring wheat—a little over 21 bushels per acre. The yield was bit low compared to 1915 when production ran as high as 35 to 50 bushels an acre.



July 16 letter, the last one of 1911, was filled with optimism. They enjoyed high hopes for a good harvest and Dennis had work with neighbors. In December the *Burnettsville News* published a letter Dennis addressed to “Editor and Friends” with the headline: “No Regrets for Leaving Hoosier State for West.” The letter announced “their good health and fair prosperity with bright hopes for the future” and explained their situation:

There were thousands of acres [of wheat] sown in our vicinity this fall and prospects for a bumper crop are fine so far this winter. I am one of the small farmers, of course, but I have sown 120 acres of winter wheat and expect or at least I am planning to put in about 70 acres of spring grain.<sup>17</sup>

Dennis also wrote that one need not fear Montana winters; aside from “some very disagreeable winds at times” they were “much better than the winters in Indiana.” He ended his letter by encouraging readers to consider coming out to Montana to visit or buy land.

Similarly, the Carter paper described the area’s climate in true booster terms:

The climate conditions in the Carter section are not excelled anywhere in the northwest. The clear dry air is extremely invigorating and combined with the large percentage of bright days, makes the climate one of the most healthful and pleasant in the world. There are few days during the entire year in which out-door work cannot be done with comfort. No one need fear winters here.<sup>18</sup>

Although 1911 and 1912 were good crop years, the Davis’s personal lives were not altogether rosy. Dennis fell ill in winter 1912, Dennis’s brother Albert suffered an appendicitis, and Maggie’s teaching position in the Carter school was less than satisfactory. In

her letter of May 2, 1912, Maggie wrote from Carter, where she was staying until school was over, that she was getting tired and “nervous.”

The kids got so mean and I whipped till I was tired and you can’t expel without the consent of the board so I left the matter with them and they gave me permission to expel any one who wouldn’t behave and obey me.

This is the one reference in Maggie’s letters indicating her feelings about teaching.

However, in the same letter Maggie felt it necessary to defend the decision to come to Montana:

I can hardly wait to come back and show them all I knew what I was doing when I came to Mont. There is nothing sure about our coming back next winter. I may have to work again. . . . If I could just coax you folks to come that would do just as well and you need the trip more than we do. I think I could promise you a good time. . . . Tell papa if we never come till we come to stay it may be a long time. Now mamma, honest which way would you rather it would be that we were settled down on a little rented farm or be out here on a farm so big that we can have fields half a mile long and four hundred acres in pasture? Of course I would like to see you folks but aside from that I am well and happy.

There is only one letter from 1913, written by Maggie to her younger brother Ted, and it detailed items of interest to a thirteen year old, animals she observed, and hunting. However, in the first letter of 1914, written February 22, Maggie mounted another defense of Montana in response to sarcastic comments from her family. Her concern stemmed from a report by a Mrs. Wagoner who

15. Homesteaders remembered dancing as an important part of their social life. People rode for miles to attend a dance. Bennett and Kohl, *Settling the Canadian-American West*, 136-39.

16. *Carter (Mont.) Herald*, February 21, 1912.

17. *Burnettsville (Ind.) News*, December 21, 1911.

18. *Carter (Mont.) Herald*, February 21, 1912.



had visited the Davises. “We were so mad at what she (Mrs. Wagoner) said,” Maggie wrote in defense of their decision.

You don’t need to worry about our looking poor. Dennis weighed 183 the last time he was at town and I am not far behind him.

You don’t need to think there is any danger of Dennis getting discouraged out here for wild horses couldn’t drag him away from here. He says for the first time in his life he has an opportunity to make good. Mr. Wiley [a neighbor and Burnettsville family friend] was offered a loan of \$4,500 on his farm and I see no reason why we could not get that much so you see we could get that anytime and pull out, *but we’ll never get another farm give to us* so we had better stay with it till land advances to \$50 to \$60 then we can sell and retire or travel or something.

In the letter of March 15, 1914, Maggie continued to encourage her parents to visit to see for themselves what Montana was like.

We are just planning and planning on your coming this summer. I hope we won’t be disappointed again. There are so many things we want you to see and to ask your opinion on. We are not forgetting any of you.

She also mentioned the development of a telephone company, a sure sign of progress:

Each farmer pays to build the line and whenever he can afford it he buys a phone and hooks on. They are using the wire on the fences and raising the wire over the roads. We will not get a phone for awhile yet anyway. There has also been a petition signed and sent to Washington for a mail route. Don’t you think we are in a progressive country?



And she reinforced her point by listing her magazine subscriptions: *McCall's*, *Homelife*, *American Woman*, *Housewife*, *Woman's World*, and Dennis's—*Successful Farming*, *Dakota Farmer*, and three weekly newspapers.

There was no correspondence until Maggie wrote on January, 5, 1915, to thank her family for Christmas presents and respond to family news. Her letter contained little about their lives other than descriptions of visits with friends from Indiana. In February Maggie wrote that Dennis was not very “strong” that winter but did not want anyone to know. She also made clear her intention to “vote ‘dry’ at the election in 1916.” The opportunity to vote against alcohol was for Maggie, as it was for many women, apparently the primary factor that led her to register. Although women were enfranchised in the state and local elections, as of 1914 Maggie was not registered, though Ray, Albert, and Dennis had been registered voters in Precinct Four since 1910.<sup>19</sup>

The letter of July 17, 1915, related Maggie’s poultry successes and failures, berry picking, her hopes to visit the family in Indiana, her wish that her family would visit, and the Fourth of July celebration with “nothing much doing.”<sup>20</sup> For the first time Maggie mentioned anxiety about the erratic rains and hard work:

It was dry, not a drop of rain in April, one rain in May but on the first day of June it began to rain and has rained nearly every day since. . . . It isn’t supposed to rain in July on account of harvest and never has before. Gardens, corn and oats are not very good.

However, 1915 was a good year, a “miracle year,” with wheat production as high as thirty-five to fifty bushels an acre. Grain fetched high prices due to the war in Europe, and the harvest was bounteous thanks to sufficient rain at the right time.<sup>21</sup>

In the same letter Maggie also noted land prices were rising:

There have been two ranches sold for \$8500 each. Do you think that is a good price or not? One of the men is sorry already that he sold. Dennis has 130 acres of summer fallow ready to sow. But we have to work awful hard and help is so hard to get,

Whenever possible, the Davises associated with family and friends who shared their Indiana roots. Their goal was not to make Montana their long-term home, but to sell their homestead for a good profit and return to Indiana to buy a farm. Maggie identified the people in the photograph at left as “Mr. and Mrs. J. M. Wiley” (who were family friends from Burnettsville) and “Agnes, and Cecil, Floweree, Mont.” She mentioned Agnes Wiley Plank in an October 29, 1919, letter to her mother, by which one may deduce that Agnes and Cecil were, mostly likely, the Wileys’ daughter and son-in-law.

In her July 17, 1915, letter Maggie wrote, "We went to Carter July 3 but there wasn't much doing.

On July 4 Rays, us and Wileys ate dinner along the banks of the Missouri." On the Fourth of July the next year, they went to Carter and took the photograph at right, but no letters survive to describe the festivities.



that is good help and so expensive. We now have the third man this summer and none very good and the one we have now wants \$3 per day through harvest so I think we'll have to let him go. I think some times we are foolish to work so hard. By the time we get enough ahead to buy an automobile we'll be too old to enjoy it.

Despite good crop yields, Maggie was not a "booster." Never entering into the social life of Carter, she continued to miss home:

In 1917 I think we'll have a good crop and then maybe I'll get to come home providing some of you come here first and we don't lose any more horses or get hailed out or the cut worms dont eat us up or any other bad luck come.

There are no letters for the rest of 1915 or 1916 or any information about how the Davis enterprise fared during that period. Weather records show that 1916 was a record cold year, with the lowest mean temperature since 1880, but rainfall exceeded expectations. The total precipitation for 1916 was 20.7 inches, 7 inches above the annual average. Disaster followed, however, when drought and widespread crop failure struck the High Line in 1917.<sup>22</sup>

Maggie's only letter for 1918 was to her brother Ted. She related that she was teaching in Ulm, south of Great Falls, and that Dennis had a job on a ranch. There is

no explanation for these circumstances in the letter, but it is likely that they needed cash to pay debts brought about by crop failures. Paying debts was important to both Dennis and Maggie, and it was a quality admired by Gorman descendants, who stressed its importance in interviews.<sup>23</sup> In a December 1921 letter, written after Dennis's brother Ray had declared bankruptcy and left for Washington, Maggie asked if he had told the family about his bankruptcy. She wrote that "no one here knowing conditions think any worse of them for it. But they weren't forced into it." She then listed the family's cash assets to make her point.

Things went from bad to worse in 1919. "The winter wheat and rye had all been ruined," Maggie wrote from Carter on June 19. There had been only one shower all spring and a succession of sandstorms.

And of all the poor horses I ever saw ours were the poorest. . . . We were over south of Benton and a little cloud came up. Well it rained quite hard. It was pathetic to see the joy of the people. . . . It rained even harder out here. Dennis had already sowed 48 acres of spring wheat and reseeded most of 56 acres to oats and wheat and we went right to work and sowed 34 acres of flax. That was all the seed we had and we were afraid to risk buying more. There were 14 acres more in the field. There have been several more good rains since. The flax is looking nice and the wheat was until Monday and we had a dreadful sand storm and when it was over

19. Jack K. Castor, *Carter, A New Town, Making Good* (n.p., 1991).

20. Mrs. Andrew Larkin's recollection of the July 4, 1915, celebration gives a very different picture of a two-day July Fourth complete with horse racing and dancing. Participants brought an old organ from Carter and built a dance platform. "We sure thought it was wonderful and different from anything we had ever seen. I met people from all around that day." Mrs. Andrew Larkin reminiscence, in Craig, comp., *Paths of the Past*, 22.

21. Malone, Roeder, and Lang, *Montana*, 191. The United States' entry into the war in 1917 increased the demand for food and increased commodity prices. The 1917 Lever Food and Control Act

guaranteed the price of wheat at not less than two dollars a bushel. *Ibid.*, 252-53.

22. *Fort Benton (Mont.) River Press*, January 10, 1917.

23. Rosemary Gorman Litke, Monticello, Indiana, Clyde A. Davis, Burnettsville, Indiana, and Mary and Wilbur Criswell, Lewistown, Montana, contributed information about the Davis and Gorman family histories in 1997 interviews. Conversations with Carter residents Doris and Jim Reichelt and Ray Castor and Great Falls resident Kay Wiley in 1997 provided much information about Carter and its environs.



Maggie and Dennis visited Burnettsville in 1921. They wanted to move back permanently, but crops and prospects for selling the Montana homestead were poor due to drought that had started in 1917. Thus, they faced another year of trying to raise the capital to pay for their return.



the field looked bare again. We have millions of grasshoppers again. They are taking the garden as fast as it comes up. . . . Dennis is trying to get a piece of ground ready for millet. But he is so crippled and the horses are so poor and the thistles grow so fast it is uphill business. . . . Dennis says all we lack of selling is to find a sucker. . . .

They say the dry years are over for Montana now for four or five years but I don't know what to think. We have land that ought to be summer fallowed now. I wanted him to get 45 acres ready but he gets discouraged so easy and gives up. We have 6 heifers and cows that will have to go I guess. But we cant get rid of the horses unless we eat them.

Writing October 29, 1919, from Ulm where she was again teaching and Dennis was working on a nearby ranch, Maggie described the drought and its consequences:

Not a thing except a three or four year old straw pile occasionally for the stock. Not one family in a hundred has potatoes and not a bite from the garden. . . . If Dennis could have got some one to have kept the cattle he would have gone to work in [Great Falls]. . . . The Unions are howling for more money all the time but from \$5 to \$7 a day looks pretty good to a poor farmer who hasn't had a crop for 3 years.

Other letters written from Ulm that December and the following May hint of a decision to sell out and return to Indiana as soon as possible. Maggie wrote that the Ulm school wanted her to return for the next winter term, but she hoped "something will turn up so we can get away before then." If they were still in Montana in June, she planned to take more training because the qualifications for teaching were being

increased and she "may have to keep the farm going again next winter."

Maggie traveled to Burnettsville in July 1921 and returned to Montana in September, taking a teaching job in Carter. "It seems like a dream that I was back there this summer," Maggie commented in her December 12 letter:

Yes I realize that we could make a living there at least. But Dennis is all built up on "next Year." . . . This is great next year country.

After noting the people who have left their area, she wrote:

We'll soon be monarch of all we survey. Gee though but it's lonesome. I dont know what I would do if it wasn't for the school and I get so behind with my work and so rushed sometimes I wish I had never heard of it. . . . But as only half the taxes were paid they don't know if they can keep the schools going. The county is bonded so heavily now that its credit is gone.

An editorial from the *Fort Benton River Press* echoed her concerns about school funding:

The inability of Chouteau county citizens to pay the recent high cost of public service is indicated by the fact that about 3,800 of the 8,000 owners of taxable property are delinquent on taxes that were levied last year.<sup>24</sup>

There are no letters for 1922; on April 23, 1923, Maggie wrote:

24. *Fort Benton (Mont.) River Press*, January 25, 1922.

25. *Ibid.*, July 11, 1923. The *Fort Benton River Press* reported that three Chouteau County banks, including the Carter State Bank, had folded. In November federal officials ordered the First Bank of Carter to close, and Carter had no banks thereafter.

Our prospects in every way were never poorer. We have had a dry winter. Winter wheat is going or gone. Fields that should be green are brown as can be. Everybody that was left is planning on going now. . . . Even the bankers have nothing encouraging to say anymore. . . . I don't know what will become of us. If we could sell the land I would be for coming back but as it is I don't see any hopes of ever coming.

Dennis wants to go over south where they get rain and rent land and I suppose we'll have to do that for we can move there without so much expense. It is something terrible the way this country has gone to pieces and the way the people have suffered.<sup>25</sup>

The next letter, written September 26, 1923, listed a series of disasters: grasshoppers ate the heads off the rye, rain while they were harvesting, problems hiring help for the harvest (only two threshing outfits were left in the area), the burden of boarding and feeding the threshers, and a windstorm that destroyed the grain stacks. She listed the work needed to be done, Dennis's exhaustion, and then asked:

So how are we to come home? I think we should be encouraged to stay instead of to leave for it sure takes courage to stay. But mama I know you and papa wouldn't give up and leave everything. We have debts and couldn't pay them if we went and I can't bear the idea of taking "the cure" as they say here like the rest most all are doing.

"Taking the cure" was the derogatory term for the actions of those homesteaders who walked away from their debts or who filed for bankruptcy. The March 7, 1923, *Fort Benton River Press* reprinted an excerpt that reportedly appeared in numerous bank magazines, apparently in response to a midwestern bank's inquiry regarding Montana farmers' use of bankruptcy courts:

We have been afflicted with quite a number of settlers, now happily vanishing. . . . Where they came from they were "ne'er-do-wells." The propaganda went forth to them that the government would give them a double-sized home on the public domain for nothing—double-sized because the land was considered to be semi-arid, and one-half should lie fallow while the other was cropped each year. This

"All of us but Ed," noted Maggie on the Gorman family photograph taken during her 1921 visit. From left are Sara, Maggie, Ted, Mac, Emma (Mama), John (Papa), and Fred.

something for nothing appealed to them. One portion of them, probably the laziest and shrewdest, mortgaged their easily acquired donations for as much as they could get and took the next train out. . . . The next portion, probably the largest one, likewise mortgaged and then duly sluggardized over a pretense to cultivation. . . . They got the land for nothing why not get the crops for nothing? The poor foolish banks, like cornucopia, emptied their coffers into the laps of these people on the supposition that they were the last word in the sturdy progress of building up the new country. Then bankruptcy.

"Taking the cure" by the farmers has been largely a matter of fashion. One will start it and others follow until in some cases nearly the entire community has taken advantage of the bankruptcy act. They were bankrupt when they came, and they are adjudged bankrupt when they leave.<sup>26</sup>

Maggie Davis's use of the term suggests its commonness at that time, although current Carter residents interviewed were unfamiliar with it.<sup>27</sup>

A more balanced view of leavers is expressed by John Heinen, a sympathetic neighbor:

Just about [1917] . . . the business of raising wheat seemed to run into all kinds of difficulties. As drought, cut worms, and wire worms continued to take their toll, most of our neighbors left us. Probably some of them should have stayed with their homesteads but I never could blame them for leaving. During the bad years every family got more or less in debt. By leaving the homestead, the accumulated debts were also left behind, creating a situation in the business world that called for closing banks; and, of course, discontinuing the extension of credit by business people.<sup>28</sup>





In October 1923 Maggie's younger sister Sara and her husband Virden Graham visited for a month. Maggie wrote to her parents on November 2 that they had enjoyed having guests and would miss them. She also informed them that she and Dennis planned to stay another year:

We have a lot of stock we can't sell and we can't hear of anything there that is desirable and reasonable to rent and we would like to get another good crop or two or three and then we will have money to move with. I think you will realize after they [the Grahams] get back more of the true state of affairs here and that we were not the only ones that are broke.

On December 3 Maggie wrote to her sister Mae Gorman that "it is so lonesome since everybody is gone that I can't stay out there alone so I go with Dennis about every place he goes." Although concerned about her parents' health, she was torn about returning and leaving Dennis to manage by himself. She still hoped that "maybe by another fall we could have enuf to pay Fred [her brother] and get moved back. Its been a hard struggle and we've all lost but it can't be helped now."

Maggie explained to her sister Mae on March 24, 1924, that she was sorry everyone was disappointed she did not come home for a visit, but it would have "taken a lot of money for both of us to come and now it would have been over and we would be facing a dreary cheerless future again."

The trip . . . only makes me more discontented and dissatisfied here, and as long as Dennis is bound and determined to stay in Mont. it isn't much use for me to be making visits back there. . . . I hope we have a crop too but I have no faith in it. If we don't have a crop we can't come and if we do have Dennis will want to stay and try it again so prospects are slim. And I hate the thot of giving up broke, too. And of course with nothing in sight there [in Burnettsville] either.

By summer farming conditions seemed to be getting better, and Maggie wrote on June 8 that people were returning. There was even talk about opening school again. A good crop in 1924 made it possible for Maggie and Dennis to drive to Burnettsville for a visit.

Upon Maggie and Dennis's return to Montana in March, it seems clear they had resolved to move back to Indiana. Subsequent letters included reports about the stock and crops, responses to family events, and

questions about a teaching position for Maggie in Indiana and about moving the stock back since there would be few, if any, buyers in Montana.

Maggie returned to Indiana in fall 1925 and took a teaching position. Dennis stayed in Montana that winter making final arrangements to leave, returning to Indiana July 1, 1926. The *Burnettsville News* reported his return:

Dennis Davis arrived here yesterday morning from Carter, Montana, with all of his cattle, horses, farming tools and household goods to make his home in Hoosierland again. He left here sixteen years ago and took up a 320 acre claim near Carter and has met the same fate that has befallen all of those who settled in that semi-arid region. The soil is extremely fertile and produces immense crops when there is enough rainfall, otherwise they are a failure. Unfortunately the barren years outnumber the fruitful ones and the farms in that locality are being rapidly deserted and their owners are seeking other localities in which to recoup their ill fortune.<sup>29</sup>

Maggie and Dennis stayed with Maggie's parents until February 1927 when they bought a 110-acre farm south of Burnettsville. Over time they repaid their debts.

**G**etting their own place had been the Davis's primary goal, as Maggie frequently reminded her parents in her defenses of their move to Montana. On June 8, 1924, in one of her last letters before returning to Indiana, Maggie repeated, "We came out here to get money for a farm there so we wouldn't be renters and maybe if we stay long enough we'll win out yet."

Would Maggie and Dennis have stayed in Montana if there had been no drought? It seems doubtful. They failed to develop close ties with their Montana neighbors, and there were strong pulls to return east. A common explanation given by those who stayed during the years of drought and after was that they had few alternatives. As Clyde Sullivan wrote:

I came to Montana in May, 1913, primarily to find a climate a little more beneficial to my health; I saw a new land of great spaces and new homesteads and I stayed because, - well, I liked what I saw and I had no money to go back where I came from.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike Clyde Sullivan, Maggie grew to dislike what she saw. And the Davises did have alternatives. With

26. *Ibid.*, March 7, 1923.

27. Doris and Jim Reichelt interview; Ray Castor interview.

28. Pleasant Valley Home Demonstration Club, comp., *Footprints through the Valley*, 27.

29. *Burnettsville (Ind.) News*, July 1, 1926.

30. Clyde Sullivan reminiscence, in Craig, comp., *Paths of the Past*, 49.

31. Rosemary Gorman Litke interview; Clyde A. Davis interview; Mary and Wilbur Criswell interview.


the end of the drought, they were able to leave Montana, in debt but with sufficient cash from the 1924 crop to ship their stock. When considering their options, Maggie and Dennis weighed the Gorman family's entreaties, the Montana climate, and the fact that they were familiar with Indiana farming conditions and made a rational decision to return. Maggie's teaching salary, along with financial support from her family, gave them a means of escaping the absolute financial ruin that struck many homesteaders. Just as homesteading was an economic decision so was leaving—they would be better off returning than staying.

It is also important to keep in mind the dynamics of Maggie's relationship with her family. She had a unique place in the family because she was the first child who lived beyond infancy after four stillbirths. Although Mrs. Gorman eventually had five babies, Maggie was always her father's favorite. Growing up, Maggie disdained housework. She preferred to be outside with her father, a preference her mother tried to change by sending her to an aunt for the summer to learn to clean, cook, sew, and knit. These were women's skills, which Maggie did not enjoy or value. Possibly her lack of interest in such tasks was at the root of her apparent isolation in Montana from neighbor women who placed a great emphasis on domestic talents.

What is more of a mystery is the absence of any mention of church activities, since both Maggie and Dennis had strong church ties in Indiana. Carter had a Presbyterian church as well as other less formally organized congregations, and in Fort Benton, approximately twenty miles from their homestead, there was an organized Christian Church. Maggie's letters de-

scribe visits to Fort Benton but do not mention attending church.

Eva Gorman Finnell wrote that her aunt would tell stories about the West, but when asked to write her reminiscences, Maggie refused, saying that "they were so hard she wanted to forget them." While descendants thought that "Maggie's Irish pride" made her hide from her family the hardships she and Dennis endured, it seems they never fully appreciated the despair her letters reveal. Indiana descendants considered Maggie a "workhorse" but a "complainer" and a "stone around Dennis's neck."<sup>31</sup> Although she was likely both, what emerges from the letters is a loving marital relationship facing relentless pressure from the Gorman family for the couple to return to Indiana.

Leavers have been considered failures. Such a characterization, however, conflates an individual's goals with the desire of communities for political and economic growth. Homesteaders' goals varied. Maggie and Dennis Gorman had no intention of settling the West or taming the frontier. Their community remained in Indiana and their goal was to earn an economic stake out west to pay for a farm of their own near family and friends. 

SEENA B. KOHL is a professor of anthropology at Webster University, St. Louis, Missouri, and coauthor of *Settling the Canadian-American West* (1995). She is currently researching the intersection of social and historical time, memory, and women's perception of their life choices.

In 1925 Maggie took a teaching job back home in Burnettsville and Dennis followed the next year with their cattle, horses, farming tools, and household goods. In 1927 they bought a 110-acre farm south of town, fulfilling their dream. Maggie is pictured below at age eighty. Eva Gorman Finnell recounted that her aunt would tell stories about the West but refused to write her reminiscences, saying that "they were so hard she wanted to forget them."

