

Geography Field Work (416-650)

Summer 1999

Instructor: Glen Fredlund

TA: Jean Kowal

**Final Paper and Report, Part I:  
Alternative Economy in Carter County, Montana**

Bernhard Reiter

Applied System Scientist

<bernhard@uwm.edu> [www.uwm.edu/~bernhard](http://www.uwm.edu/~bernhard)

*People just decide they want to stay  
and then they find a way to make it work.  
M. Waterland, Ekalaka, MT*

## 1 Introduction

Jonathan Raban in his book [6] tells the story of homesteaders in the mid-west mostly driven by optimistic dreams about an ideal farm life on land they will own. Today the population in the south-east corner of Montana still lives in a rural area with farming and ranching as most visible income source.

Being interested in the present situation of the area, I happily picked up our instructor's ideas on a field course topic to look into alternative economic models. Dinosaur and Game Hunting might be the new cash crops to grow on the dry land. Tourist attractions and organic farming are in theory methods to raise the value of the good old land.

## 2 Context Review

It is known that Carter county covers area, where a lot of interesting fossils can be found. Tourist attractions connected with dinosaur hunting can be found in neighbouring states, like HotSpring, South Dakota.

### 2.1 Timeframe

The field work was done from monday the 2nd August to friday the 13th, 1999. Six days were spend in Ekalaka where the group stayed at Camp Needmore in the Custer National Forest.

### 2.2 Location

Carter County lies in the south-east corner of Montana. The county capital and biggest town with about 440 inhabitants is Ekalaka ( $45^{\circ}53'20''N$   $104^{\circ}33'8''W$ ). Ekalaka is about 150 km south from the next big highway, Interstate 94. The next largest town is Baker, Fallon county to the north with about 1800 people. Distances are measured in drive time and the 55

km to Baker are easily worth half an hour. To shop in a real city, about another hour to Miles City adds to the way. In [2] the little shop in Ekalaka is classified as a Minimum Convenience Center, Baker as Partial Shopping Center and Miles City with the only Complete Shopping Center in 1989. Ekalaka also has a little runways for small planes.

Carter County borders to Harding and Butte County in South Dakota in the East. Extending to the south is Crook County, Wyoming. Touristic brochures devide Montana in six "Countries". "Custer Country" is the huge south west region of Montana contaning the county of interest.

With the interstate the the north and the Custer Battle Field to the west, Carter County itself has no outstanding tourist attractions. Notable are the Medicine Rocks State Park and the Carter County museum in Ekalaka. The county museum supposetly is the first county museum founded in Montana in 1936 [4].

Only about 1500 people live in the county. It is expected that most of them are ranchers and farmers, though the land is too dry to earn an easy living from this profession. To quote from [2], finding declining 47% of Carter counties' population was living on farms in 1989:

Bonanza [large scale] farms are typical in this area. Large farms are necessary because the dry climate will not support annual harvest of all the land [...]. Wheat and livestock are the primary commodities produces. Barley is also a significant crop in this area.

## 2.3 Numbers

Even in a short article like this having "financial" in the headline commits to give a few rough figures about Ekalaka in Carter Country, Montana. Most of them originate in Census Information or are estimated by the Montana Department of Commerce [3].

### 2.3.1 Population

Montana's population in 1998 is believed to be 880 thousand unequally distributed in 56 counties. That denotes a little increase from the 800 thousand of the 1990 census. About 48% live in rural areas and only 2.3 person can be found per square kilometer( $km^2$ ). They reside in 340 thousand

housing units. [1] is a nice resource for comparison to other states in the Upper Midwest.

Carter County is remote within Montana. Its population number stagnated around 1550 people, a density of one person per 5  $km^2$ . It ranks among the last 10 percent counties regarding population in the state.

### 2.3.2 Income

Montanas GROSS State product is about 19 billion current US dollars, but only one billion is created by agriculture, foresting and fishing. The importance of this industry sector also declined from about 10% in 1977 to the current 5% GROSS contribution in 1998. Hotel & logging and Amusement and Recreation both contribute about 200 million in 1998.

The personal per capita income<sup>1</sup> in the state almost reached 20,000 \$ in 1997. The average of the US lies 5,000 \$ higher. There is also a difference over 3,000 \$ in the rural and urban portion of Montana. The latter regions at least have an average per capita income about 18,000 \$. Carter County's 13,000\$ are significantly under the rural and the state income figure.

In 1997 the earnings in Carter County only contributed 30% to the total personal income. 50% were dividends, interests and rent and the rest were transfer payments.

## 3 Field Methods

To find out about business sidelines and their impact, the general financial situation about typical households has to be known. The difficulties started right here, as this kind of data of course is very personal and therefore not easy to acquire. Questions towards the financial stability of the family situation are delicate and not without reason impolite.

The most promising strategy was to ask around for different kind of alternative businesses and find out who is involved. The second step was to informally interview persons, who are known to engage in this kind of activity. Their perspective on the relevance of activity on making a living for their family and for other families was asked for.

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<sup>1</sup>Based on county summaries and different from the PCPI. But the findings are generally the same.

Therefore this short paper resembles more a report because it is largely based on personal observations and anecdotal evidence.

The asked questions naturally adapted over the week, but all of them touched:

- Who has business sidelines and what their impact is.
- Magnitude of the potential for touristic activities.
- Is the Wagon Train financially working out.
- Outfitting.
- Is organic farming considered an alternative?

## 4 Interviews and Visits

### 4.1 A start at NRCS

First information about active persons willing to talk about alternative economy were gathered [8]. About half of these people could be interviewed later. Mentioned models were outfitting, wagon train, auctioneering, elk and buffalo ranching. A few people in town run a wagon train each year and they thought once about going commercial with it. Another wagon train is a commercial operation in Boys in the south west of Carter County.

It was perceived that the seventies were economical good, but in the eighties people needed a hobby. Like somebody, who grew into being a part time silversmith. Organic farming does not seem to be a big thing. Supposedly an "Organic Farmers List" exist.

A few weeks before the field course took place, the 'Montana Ranch Days' were taken place in Carter County. So we missed it. They were generally considered a big success.

### 4.2 Ekalaka Wagon Train

Mr. Larson as one of the organisers of the Ekalaka Wagon Train, who also happens to manage Camp Needmore told me more about it[9]. The

Wagon Train is organised every year. Because of the risk for participating persons, insurance had been the stumbling stone of further commercial ventures. They still have approximately seventy people attending each year and a lot which are not from the county. They only charge for the food and leave riding the wagon train as a free personal risk everybody can choose for themselves.

As an interesting side note Mr. Larson told me that the Ekalaka Wagon Train group participated in shooting an Oklahoma Land Race for a big movie. He also mentioned another person doing elk farming for game hunting.

### 4.3 National Forestservice Bureau

The few developed sites in the National Forest in that area do not generate much money. People prefer the west. If you charge people for touristic services, you also have to pay money to the National Forestservice [10].

### 4.4 Downtown Ekalaka

The saddle shop employs a well known artist in the county, John Brown. Their customer radius is about 150 Miles. They use the internet to advertise. The shop seem to generate a living for the owner pretty well, because of its unique products. They sell various art and leatherworks. A basic saddle starts selling for about 1,300\$ [11].

In the County museum reportedly not many people drop by who actually plan to dig for dinosaurs. Still their little bookshelf features two books with titles "Digging for dinosaurs" and "Dinosaur Digs".

A short visit ad the "Wholesale Hardware Store" revealed that they are pretty busy all week. Selling gas and other vehicle and machine hardware equipment to the farmers.

Information about alternative economy was sparse in the library. Almost nobody does organic farming around here, because it seems especially difficult on the dry land [12]. One person is knows to try organic growing methods that for produce.

The relatively spacious bar was full with Milwaukee students. The bartender confirmed that the bar is as full as in hunting season.

## 4.5 Montana Ranch Days

The Montana Ranch Days are an educational event in montana. It stays two years in the region which wins the bid. It might be possible to get it about every 15 years, but not more often. Part of Ekalaka's budget of over ten thousand US-Dollar comes from the state, but still everybody including the neighbouring cities had to help to make it work for the town and the county. For Ekalaka this is a major success, but only consisting of two events distributed over this two years. [13].

Mrs. Waterland told me that she does not know, how people could make a living just out of farming. The Waterland's farming business contributes about half of their household budget. And the cost of living are at least a bit lower as in metropolian areas.

Hunting is big in the region. Though being mostly a male thing, female hunters are on the raise. The Waterlands also operate a "bunkhouse", where they provide a little service for hunters. They participate in the state's "Blockmanagemant" program, which is designed to give normal persons a chance to hunt. Participates have to let hunters on their land without charge. And the government reembursts the land owners for that a bit [13].

Mrs Waterland also brought another income method for the county to my attention: Foreign exchange students, which bring in some money for the school. Four foreign exchange students might even support a teachers salary.

## 4.6 Outfitting

The Byrnes run a sucessful outfitting business in Carter County and they employ a few guides for the season and operate from three different locations in Mill Irons, Calf Creek and Morgan Ranch. They are not part of the Block Management program, but leased exclusive hunting rights from several privat ranches and exclusive guiding rights on over 100,000 acres of the Custer National Forest. They offer whitetail, mule deer and antelope hunts and specials, like Elk Archery Hunt or Spring Turkey. It is a full service, the hunters only bring their licenses and personal gear. There are three different methods to obtain a deer tag for hunting in montana. You can enter a drawing for about 250\$ or you are guarenteed a license tag for about 750 \$. Antilope tags can be applied for with a 150\$ fee. Out-

fitting service for one antelope starts at 1000\$ a person and hunting a deer starts at about 2250\$ per hunter.

The hunting season is relatively short from the start of Archery season in the beginning of september to th end of November. Therefore the Byrnes also run a ranch in the other parts of the year. The few weeks of hunting season can only carry a certain number of hunters. Some will drop out, because they will not get the license and overbooking would not working out good, ether. With two other outfitters the hunting capacity of the region seems be reached in a way that everything is sustainable in the present situation [14].

Mrs Byrne also stated that it is hard to make a living with just ranching. The neighbours make some extra money sheering sheeps. One of their friends once found a dinosaur fossil.

#### **4.7 Local Press**

In the perception of the local press it is common for people to have a second job. People try all different sort of ideas. The US economy boom does not reach the region. One rancher once formed an alliance with Remington and now they bring in hunters and new equipment.

Organic Farming seems to be not feasible on a large scale. Dinosaur hunting also is not big. Sometime a university will come out and do some digging and some might even give the farmers some compensation. And this is not because of the lack of fossils. There are enough fossils in the ground [15].

One farmer is a part-time sculptor.

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 It's not ranching and farming alone**

All results point in the direction that ranching and farming generally do not provide a living. A second job is mandatory and people tend to get creative on what to do. Sometimes it might not even called a business, but sidework or even nonmonetary household exchanges. The difficulties to make a living in small towns is further illustrated and analysed in [5].



The variety of activities seems to be rather broad, as silversmith, sculptor, investor, auctioneer are mentioned. All kind of different livestock was at least tried on the land, such as elk, buffalos, Emus and more uncommon cattle races.

## **5.2 Hunting is big**

Hunting for sure is a big in the region. It also brings in people to town but all of that only for a short season of about two or three month. I guess that a significant amount of incoming for the region is brought in by the hunters.

## **5.3 Dinosaurs rest in peace**

Though several stories of fossils founds and possible payments for them exist dinosaur hunting is not an attraction to bring money in on a regular basis. The county museum might attract a few visitors but probably is not worth the tour if you are not going around that part of the country anyway. I found no tendency to make more use of the fossil resources in the future. It might as well be that some of the farmers got lucky once in a while and actually found something or had a third party finding something and caring about paying the landowner. There also remains some doubt on the precise legal condition under which someone can charge for letting people hunt for fossils and geek them. This might fall under the mining subject and was not further researched as it does not play a major role in the subject area anyway.

## **5.4 Organic Farming not an option**

In other regions organic farming might be an approach to add value to grains, produce or even livestock and leverage the harvest in times of declining prices. For south-east montana this is not an option most people consider. It is said to be too difficult, because of the dry land farming conditions. It is also not entirely clear, how big the benefits would be as organic farming is not widely branded or perceived big enough in the US.

### 5.5 Wagon Train rolls slowly

Two Wagon train operations were brought to attention in Carter County and they both seem to be established. The one headquartered around Ekalaka is not a huge income source and though a partial success, could not be turned commercial. Apart from that this seems to be the second most successful tourist attraction of the region, after the Outfitting business. The other wagon train is commercial and based in Boyes. It seems to work out, because it is done there for about 5 years.

### 5.6 Special Education impacts

Two big private employers in the region seem to be the Trail's End Ranch [7] and the Sky Ranch. The former is a christian hide-out ranch and the latter a ranch for delinquent boys. Not much information was collected about them, but they probably employ more than the average number of people.

The Montana Ranch Days seem to be pretty successful as an exceptional event. They only last for two consecutive years.

Surprisingly enough at first thought is the fact that foreign exchange students bring in some money, which can almost support a teacher. All in all the educational efforts are a factor in the economy of the region.

### 5.7 No tourists on horses

Horsepack riding or other recreational activities are not what most farmers in Carter County dream of. Beside from being a bit apart major travel routes, the entertaining part of this kind of tourist service is the part that some interviewed people did not feel familiar with.

The landscape certainly would be interesting and beautiful enough to support nice experiences for tourists, but the remoteness which is partly responsible for this also raises the level for anyone to just drive out there to have fun. More touristically developed places are certainly without most potential customers' vicinity.

## 6 Conclusions

All signs show us that farming and ranching is still done in the area, but they are not the only income source for people living on farms. The scope of this study is so small to really grasp enough understanding of the details how these people make a living and only in-depth interviews and case studies might cure this.

The variety of sideactivities is large. Recreational offers with the exception of hunting are not a focus in the area and probably never will be. Ekalaka is too remote and in a way surrounded by more developed recreational regions. So almost no horsebackriding or dinosaur digging. A bit of wagon train riding and more local events take place. A lot sidelines therefore target fellow farmers or customers living in vicinity.

Inhabitans of Carter County deliberately have choosen that spot as home and they are optimistic to survive there. There is no reason to believe that they cannot make it.

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